Chance, Destiny Or the Will of God

Love Story of a Russian Girl and
An Italian Prisoner of War in Germany

With Rare Data of Operations
From an Original Book of Flight
Of the Italian Legionary Air Force
In the Spanish Civil War

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The Italian Prisoner Of War

Chapter 1

Meeting the Italian Prisoners of War

By Olga Gladky Verro

Sometime at the end of June 1944 a new draftswoman came to work in the drafting office where I worked at the *Presswerke Laband* factory.[1] She presented herself as *Frau*[2] Maria, making deliberate emphasis on the word "*Frau.*" Maybe she wanted it to stand out and to give the importance that she was a *Volksdeutsche*, or maybe she felt that it was more respectable than being called simply by her first name, Maria. But she definitely didn't want to be called by her last name, Alexandrova, which sounded too Slavic for a *Volksdeutsche*.

She arrived to Germany from the city of Kharkov.[3] Although she was about ten years younger then my mother and there was a great difference in my and her age, we almost instantly became very good friends. She was a widow; her only son was drafted in the Red Army at the beginning of the war and she hadn't heard from him since then. She feared that he had been killed in the first waves sent to slaughter by the Red Army generals who were trying to stop the advance of the German tanks and airplanes with the bodies of the young men.

Frau Maria had many years of experience in architectural drafting, but she was less familiar with mechanical drafting techniques and standards. When she began to work in the mechanical drafting office she was afraid to make mistakes and to be held accountable for them. Therefore, the master draftsman assigned her to do the work that I had been doing before she arrived, to copy the drawings made by the other draftsmen on the parchment paper in India ink and then to make blueprint copies to be sent to the various production departments.

While *Frau* Maria was waiting for an apartment in the workers' hamlet of Laband, she lived in the women's section of the Camp for single foreign workers, mostly Polish and French. That part of the camp was separated from the section of Italian prisoners of war only with the high double barbwire fencing.

It was summer and the darkness was not descending until late in the evening. This gave the young women and the young Italian men a few hours to rest outside their barracks after their twelve hours of work in the factory. The young men and women did not need to speak a common language to show their interest in each other. Protected by the security of the fence, the young women were flirting with the young Italians, who were very inventive in telling and showing with gestures their admiration of the women.

Although *Frau* Maria was not in her prime—she was probably in her early forties—she was very attractive woman. She was slender and had a well-proportioned figure. And she resembled more the Mediterranean type than the Arian race. She had long wavy dark brown hair that was combed back and held in a soft chignon; her brown eyes and well-outlined eyebrows complemented her classical facial features. No wonder she found an Italian admirer right away who just happened to be older than his

compatriots.

Frau Maria confided to me about her conquest, but she confessed that she was not as enthusiastic about her Italian admirer as he was about her. “There are two or three other young Italian men who are much more attractive and distinguished than he is,” she told me. “I see them every morning on my way to the factory. They march proudly at the head of the column, full of youthful spirit and singing Italian songs. They are always neatly shaved, wearing clean white shirts with the unbuttoned collars spread outside of their blue uniforms.” And she added with regret, “If I was only a few years younger, I would have never allowed them to escape from my charms!”

I was intrigued by her almost passionate description of these young Italian men and told her, “I am curious to see at least one of these young men to find out for myself if they are really so attractive, or if it is only your vivid imagination.”

“It is very easy to see them,” she answered. “I saw that two of them are working in the telephone repair workshop right up the stairs in that huge *Werkstatt* Machine Hall next door. All you have to do is find a good excuse to visit the workshop.”

I promptly suggested, “You mean, like asking them to repair something for us.” Then remembering the tricks that the young men used at the Heinkel[4] factory to see me, I added, “Let’s disconnect the telephone!”

“Oh, no!” exclaimed *Frau* Maria. “It is not safe. What would happen if somebody found out that we did it? Besides, we never answer the telephone. The head draftsman might just go himself to call them instead of sending one of us. Let’s find some small tool that you could take there for repairs.”

During the lunchtime we searched in all the desk drawers and *Frau* Maria found an old ruler-pen that had a small nick on its point. “Here,” she said, “tell them that it fell on the floor and ask them to file it a little to make it work.”

It was close to the end of the lunch break when I went to see those young Italian men that *Frau* Maria liked so much... As I exited the main entrance door of our building I saw a small group of Soviet prisoners of war busying themselves near the mess-drum left outside after lunch had been distributed to the Italian prisoners of war. With their bare hands they were scooping out the remnants of the gluey soup that remained attached to the walls and the bottom of the drum and licking it avidly from their dirty hands. I thought that they resembled hungry animals attacking their prey. And then immediately I felt ashamed for making such an undeserved comparison of my unfortunate compatriots, who were poor victims of the war and forced by hunger to behave like this. But most of all, I felt ashamed of the Germans who were treating like animals the men who worked for them.

These men probably surrendered without fighting because they, as many other Soviet citizens, believed that the Germans were their liberators from the communist oppression. Instead, their captors treated them worse than animals. The men were so absorbed in satisfying their hunger that they paid no attention to me as I walked by in a hurry and entered the *Werkstatt* door.

The telephone repair workshop was high under the roof on a structure similar to a balcony on the left side of the *Werkstatt* hall wall. To reach the stairs leading to the workshop I had to walk across the whole length of the *Werkstatt*. It was usually a noisy place, humming with the motors’ noise and the squeaking sounds of metal being shaved, bored, or milled on the machines. But toward the end of the lunch break it was

completely quiet. The sound of my footsteps on the concrete floor reverberated from the high metal beams and glass roof and I switched to tiptoeing so I would not interfere with the sanctity of the silence. After six hours of work and a scanty meal tired workers were sleeping or napping wherever they could find a comfortable place to sit or to lie down—they needed to rest before resuming another six hours of standing on their feet working on the machines.

As I began to climb the steep steps leading to the telephone repair workshop, the deep sound of the chimney from the Ida Hot foundry announced the end of the lunch break and the *Werkstatt* began to awake from the silence.

I knocked and slightly opened the door of the telephone workshop, asking in German, "May I come in?"

"Ya, ya," I heard the answer.

"*Guten Tag*!" I greeted in German, entering the room.

"*Guten Tag*!" answered the man sitting at the table on the right of the door. He asked me in German but with a strong French accent, "What we can do for you, *Frauline*?"

I thought, "This one is a Frenchman and he is not very young." I gave a quick look around the room. On the left side of the room two young men in the blue uniforms with white collars of their shirts neatly spread out were sitting at the bench. I thought, "Good, the Italians are here." I handed the Frenchman the ruler-pen and said, "I work in the drafting office. This ruler-pen fell on the floor and it smears the ink. Do you have a very fine file to remove a small nick on its point?"

The Frenchman touched the point of the pen and called in French, "Hey, Giulio, come here!"

One young Italian came to the table. The Frenchman handed him the ruler-pen and asked in French, "Can you file this nick to make this pen work properly?"

Giulio carefully inspected the point of the pen and answered in French, "I believe it is possible, but it will take some time to do it right." He inspected the tool again and told the Frenchman, "Emile, could you tell *Mademoselle* that I will try to do it by tomorrow."

The other young Italian also came to see what was going on, but he just observed without getting involved. However, it gave me a chance to see both Italians up close. "Frau Maria has good taste," I thought. "Both young men are quite handsome." I didn't want to be too obvious looking at them, but I saw that both of them were skinny and undernourished. Giulio had a more classical shaped face, while the other Italian had a rounder face and more prominent cheekbones.

Meanwhile Giulio added in French, "Emile, please ask *Mademoiselle* to bring a bottle of India ink. I shall need it to test how the pen is working."

Since I could understand French a little, I was listening attentively to Giulio and, before Emile had a chance to translate it for me in German, I replied, "*Tres bien, Monsieur*."[5]

Surprised to hear my answer in French, Emile asked, "*Parle Vous Frances, Mademoiselle*?"[6]

"*Un peau*,"[7] I replied showing with my thumb and forefinger the conventional way to indicate a small amount and then explained in German, "My mother tries to teach me French just in case we might need it, if after the war we could immigrate to France."

"Your mother speaks French?" wondered Emile.

"Yes," I explained, "she used to be a teacher of French in the old days in Russia."

"Then you are Russian?" asked Emile.

And, when I told him that I was from the Soviet Ukraine, he translated all our conversation to the Italians in French.

Giulio said, "I am very interested to know more about the life in the Soviet Union."

"Well," I replied, "if you would allow me to come here once in a while during the lunch break to practice my French with you, I will tell you what you want to know about the life under the communists."

Emile had noticed Giulio's interest and asked him jokingly, "Giulio, what do you think, should we allow *Mademoiselle* to come here to practice speaking French with us?"

"*Oui, oui*,"[8] answered Giulio with a smile, "tell her to come here and we will tutor her in French conversation."

Emile translated it for me in German and, when I agreed, he asked me, "What is your name, *Mademoiselle*?"

"Olga."

He got up from his chair and with a theatrical gesture made a presentation, "*Mademoiselle* Olga, I am Emile, this is Giulio, and this is Bruno."

"Very pleased to meet you," I replied.

"Giulio, meet your student, *Mademoiselle* Olga," Emile presented me in the same theatrical manner.

Smiling, Giulio bowed his head, "*Mademoiselle* Olga, you found yourself a tutor of French."

I also smiled and bowed my head.

"I shall be here to supervise your lessons and to chaperone you," Emile added jokingly with a wink.

At that moment we heard someone climbing the squeaky stairs. Both Giulio and Bruno quickly retreated to their places at the bench and grabbed the screwdrivers, making believe that they were working on the disassembled telephone. I felt that it was the right moment for me to leave and said to Emile, "I will bring India ink tomorrow. *Au revoir*!"[9] and I quickly exited.

At the bottom of the stairs I saw another young Italian who was busy taking care of the accumulators. I had seen him several times in the electric workshop, where I occasionally visited my uncle. He was an attractive young man and I liked him, but he was very shy even about answering my greetings. The only way I knew that he was saluting me was to see his hand slightly waving in my direction, which he also did this time when I saluted him in passing by.

Frau Maria was waiting for me, anxious to hear my opinion about the young Italians. She bombarded me with her questions, "You have been there a long time. Were they there? Did you see them? Was I right telling you that they are very attractive young men?"

I interrupted her, trying to intrigue her with anticipation of some unexpected mysterious secret, "Wait until I tell you what happened there."

"What, what happened? Tell me, please," supplicated *Frau* Maria.

"It is too long to tell you all right now. I shall tell you on our way home."

"You mean that you will make me wait until six o'clock to hear your story?"

protested *Frau* Maria. “The head draftsman is not here yet. Quickly tell me everything before he returns.”

I couldn’t keep myself silent any longer and told her what happened in the telephone workshop.

After listening to my story, *Frau* Maria exclaimed, “Olga, it is wonderful!” She was so excited, almost as if she had been in my place.

On our way home she continued to ask me to repeat over and over all the details about my visit to the telephone workshop. And she counseled me, “Now, you have to start seriously to learn French, so you can have an excuse to visit and talk to this Giulio. You don’t want to miss the chance to flirt with him.”

“*Frau* Maria, he is a handsome and polite young man; he has a nice smile and very pleasant voice that sounds so sweet in French. But I don’t even know if I would like him,” I replied. “Besides he was interested in learning about life in the Soviet Union; he was not interested in me.”

“Olga, you are naive,” she replied, and insisted on giving me advice. “He is interested in talking with you. It is a good beginning. It will give him and you a chance to know each other. There is no harm in this. Believe me, he is not different from other Italian young men in the camp; they all like the company of the young women. I can see them every evening across the barbwire fence as they try to get the attention of the women in the Camp.”

“Well," I said, “I had many young men who were my friends at the Heinkel factory and I enjoyed talking with them and they also enjoyed my company. You are right, I am also curious to know this young Italian better and it might be fun to talk to him after all.”

We reached the Camp entrance and said “Good-bye.”

As I arrived in our apartment, I told my mother, “Let’s resume my French lessons tonight.”

Surprised by such a sudden change in my attitude toward the lessons, which I had done leisurely before, my mother asked, “What happened to change your mind?”

“Well, today I met one Frenchman and one Italian who speak French and I can practice with them what I learn with you.”

“I am glad,” she said. “It doesn’t matter what the reason is, as long as you learn another language that might be useful in the near future.”

From that evening I diligently began to study French.

The next day at the end of the lunch break I went to the telephone workshop and, as I entered, I greeted in French, “*Bonjour*,[10] *Monsieur* Emile! *Bonjour Monsieur* Giulio! *Bonjour*, *Monsieur* Bruno!”

This time there were two other men in the Workshop and I greeted them in German, “*Guten Tag*!”[11]

I gave the India ink and a piece of parchment paper to Giulio and he tried to draw a line with the ruler-pen but it smeared the ink. He asked Emile to interpret for me in German that he would work on it some more and that I should come back tomorrow. Then we talked some French.

In the following weeks I was coming about two to three times a week at the end of the lunch break for practicing conversations in French with Giulio. As my knowledge of French progressed, we needed less and less of Emile’s translating. However, my French was not yet sufficient to answer all Giulio’s questions about the life in the Soviet

Union. To do this we had to use Emile as a translator.

In the absence of the German workers in the workshop, Emile, who believed in socialism, often disagreed with my anti-Soviet statements, which at first I defended with conviction. Then I decided that it was not worth it to antagonize him when he, as a French expert, participated in my conversations with Giulio; besides that, he was making my visits appear more proper in the eyes of the other coworkers.

Shortly after I met Giulio and began to visit him in the telephone workshop *Frau* Maria got an apartment in the workers' hamlet of Laband—only two apartment houses across the street from me—and we continued to walk together to and from the factory. I asked her advice on how I could show my appreciation to Giulio for his tutoring me in French.

"Do you think he would be offended if I brought him some food?" I asked her. "I know that the Italian prisoners of war are receiving the kind of food not much different from what we were given at the Ostarbaitern camp."

"Of course, he would be happy to have some food," she approved. "Ask your mother to find some food that she could buy without food coupons."

Indeed, my mother found that she could buy pork blood sausages and she cooked them with fried onions and made a nutritious pâtè. I put it in the brown enameled cup that we brought from home and carried it in a small paper bag. The first time, I brought it to the telephone workshop and placed it casually on Giulio's bench and whispered to him, "It is for you. Please, return the cup."

The next time I came, he told me, "I shared it with my friend Bruno. It was delicious. Was it pork blood sausage?"

I hesitated to answer.

"Bruno recognized it. His parents have a delicatessen shop and sell them."

Then I admitted, "Yes. It's very nutritious. My mother found that she could buy it without food coupons. Do you want her to make it for you when she finds it again?"

"Oh, yes, please. And tell your mother that we are very grateful. But next time don't bring it here. You are not allowed to give us food. We will arrange a casual encounter somewhere in the *Werkstatt* for this."

Several times after that I took them food and Bruno or Giulio came down to the entrance of the *Werkstatt* where I would give them a package. Later my mother bought, without coupons, the jars of marinated snails from France; the Germans were not used to eating them, but it was a real treat for the Italians.

Every time I returned to our drafting office from my visits to the telephone workshop, *Frau* Maria was impatient to hear what I talked about with Giulio that day and flooded me with questions. "Was Giulio waiting for you?" "How did he look at you?" "Does he show any signs that he likes you?"

"*Frau* Maria!" I would answer her with reproach. "I am never alone with him. His friend Bruno and Emile are always there and sometimes the German and Polish workers too. All I can tell you is that my French is improving thanks to Giulio and Emile. Also, Giulio is very curious about the life under the communists and asks many questions about my family. He has very good manners and behaves like a real gentleman. I think he is pleased to be with me, probably because it breaks up the monotony of the twelve hours in the workshop. But I feel that we are becoming good friends and that I am becoming very fond of him."

Frau Maria interrupted me. “Then you should show him that you are interested in him, and not only in the French conversations. You should show him that you like him as a man, not as a tutor.” And with the wisdom of an experienced woman *Frau* Maria explained to me, “Most men need some encouragement by the woman. If I was in your place, by this time I would have already conquered his heart and soul!”

“Listen, I am very happy now to consider Giulio just as my good friend. I am afraid to show too much interest in him as a man before he shows his interest in me as a girl, and not just as a person with whom he can talk about the Soviet Union."

But *Frau* Maria disagreed with me and insisted that I should nurture Giulio’s interest in me, instead of passively waiting for it. “You should not leave it to chance alone,” she insisted.

I told her that I disagreed with her approach and preferred to patiently wait and enjoy his company for now.

“You are too passive,” she told me shaking her head. But I disappointed her by replying that I would not follow her advice.

Then at the end of August 1944 the status of the Italian prisoners of war suddenly was changed to foreign workers.[12] This event made it possible for *Frau* Maria and me to know better the two Italian men that we were interested in.

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1. See the chapter “*Presswerke* Laband.”
2. Mrs. [in German].
3. The capital of Kharkovsky Province in the Eastern Ukraine.
4. See the chapter “The Remnants of the Heinkel Aircraft Factory in Oelsnitz.”
5. “Very well, Mister.” [in French].
6. “Do you speak French, Miss?” [in French].
7. “A little.” [in French].
8. “Yes, yes” [in French].
9. “Good bye!” [in French].
10. “Good day, Mister...” [in French].
11. “Good day!” [in German].
12. See the chapters “Italian Armistice” and “The Prince of My Dreams.”

The Village Of Asciano

By Olga Gladky Verro
From Aldo Tratzi, *Asciano E La Sua Storia*
And from Paolo Pieracci, "Franchini's Family Tree"

The ancestry of Giulio Verro can be traced to the small village of Asciano, located about twenty kilometers from the Ligurian Sea near the ancient city of Pisa on the western coast of central Italy in the Tuscany region. The village of Asciano is situated on the slopes and descends down to the base of Mount Pisano, which divides the two valleys, the Valley of Pisa and the Valley of Lucca. Mount Pisano makes a part of the range of Pisani Mountains that are among the oldest mountains of Italy going back to the Carboniferous period.

The presence of humans on the territory of Asciano goes back to the most ancient times. Recent local archeological finds in several Mount Pisano ancient caves trace it back 300,000 years. Historical information is available about the people that lived in this geographical area from about 5,000 B.C. to the Roman period. Between the 9th and 4th centuries B.C. it was populated by the Etruscans, who inhabited a large area extending from this region to the north, south, and east across the Apennine Mountains to the Adriatic Sea. The Etruscans had an advanced culture, which influenced the economy of the region and its cultural life. They developed commerce, navigation, and architecture; they are credited with the invention of the arch in construction and with the anchor for ships.[1]

They lived in comfortable houses and loved the pleasures of life. Social life of the rich included banquets accompanied with music and dance; and for the rich and poor there were public games, dances, and singing. From the Etruscan period, in which the town of Pisa had its origins, the life of the people who lived on the territory where the present village of Asciano is located remained closely connected to the history of Pisa. However, there are no direct historical records about the life and people in the village of Asciano during the Etruscan period.

One of the great changes in the life of people living in that location, as documented in the history of the region, occurred about 180 B.C. when the Romans took over the Etruscan territory. As was customary in the Roman Empire, the veterans of the Roman legions received large parcels of land for their services and settled there with their families, slaves, and animals. Near these properties in the Pisani Mountains villages were formed taking their names from their owners. Thus the village of Asciano took the name from its Roman owner, Axianus. During the Roman period village life was economically dependent on serving the needs of the owner of the land and, besides the peasants attending to the agricultural needs, there were those who practiced various trades needed for the maintenance of the property.[2]

After the fall of the Roman Empire one historical record attributes to the village of Asciano great importance for a castle located on the slope of Mount Pisano, because it served as the defense of Pisa from invaders. No traces of this castle are remaining,

but the villagers refer to the place where it stood by the name Castellvecchio, which means the “old castle.” During the Middle Ages this castle had seen many battles between the Pisans and invaders from neighboring city-states.[3]

During the first centuries of the Middle Ages the houses, even those of the rich, were very modest. They were constructed from wood and had only one story. The roofs were made of straw, reeds, tree branches, or small oak boards. The windows were small narrow openings that could be closed with wooden shutters. Only the churches and some monasteries had windows with glass, which was a rare and expensive material in those days. At night the light of the fireside was used for illumination and later a wick-lamp burning animal or vegetable fat was used. The furnishings in the peasants’ houses consisted of a table and benches or stools in the kitchen placed near the fireside and a large wooden case full of straw sometimes covered with a blanket to serve as a bed. It was common to go to sleep soon in the evening and to rise early so one could use as much daylight as possible.

After the fall of the Roman Empire numerous Barbarian invasions swept away fundamental principles on which the Latin society was functioning, leaving the people in that region in a dark period of history. Population of Asciano and neighboring villages was brutalized by invaders, suffered plunders, rapes, and atrocities; it was decimated by epidemics, including long periods of pestilence, and devastated by floods. Population of the whole region plunged into misery, famine, and heavy manual work that was needed for survival.

Notwithstanding all these natural calamities and man-inflicted adversities the population of Asciano experienced slow but steady growth through the centuries, influenced by the proximity of the important city of Pisa. The census of 1833 shows the population of Asciano as 1,369, the largest among the neighboring villages located in the Pisani Mountains.

It took a long time for the Christian church to overcome the indifference and apathy of the coarse and passive peasants to the teachings of Christianity. The functions of the priests in those days were limited to baptisms, marriages, funerals, and Sunday Mass in Latin, which the peasants could not understand. The parishes in that region began to keep registers of the baptized only in 1458. Some parishes were poor and were left for long periods without priests, and wandering friars often performed religious functions. Mount Pisano and the neighboring mountains were the preferred places for the monasteries. One historical record notes that at the end of the IV Century the famous Saint Augustine, during his travels to Rome, stayed for several months in the monastery at Mount Pisano, where he founded the order of the Eremite Friars.

The records show that the first parish called Pieve di San Giovanni Battista already existed in the village of Asciano in the year 1150; and another small but well known church of San Rocco was erected by the people of Asciano to commemorate the saint who, according to the peasants’ legend, in his passing through the village helped those afflicted by pestilence. The population of Asciano commemorates San Rocco on the 16th of August with grand festivities.[4]

Asciano was already famous in 1286 in the Republic of Pisa for its natural spring waters and its washerwomen, who were under Pisa’s tutorship. Later Asciano acquired great importance for its pure spring water that was perfect for drinking. Several projects were attempted to bring the water to the city of Pisa, first by Cosimo I de Medici in the

1500s, and later by his son Grandduke Ferdinand I, who began in 1588 to erect the aqueduct which was not completed until 1613 by his son Cosimo II. The Medici's aqueduct, elevated over pilasters connected by arches, extends for six kilometers from Asciano to the walls of Pisa. Its remnants are preserved today as a historical monument.[5]

Asciano has several large villas dating from 1400 to 1800, constructed and remodeled through the years. These villas were owned by noble and rich families who passed them to their heirs, or resold to other families of the same social status. One of these, Villa Scerni, has to be mentioned because the owners allowed a part of it for many years to be inhabited by the nuns of the order of Cottolengo; there until 1941, they conducted a kindergarten for the children of Asciano.[6]

Asciano has three village squares. The oldest one dates to 1820 and was dedicated in 1889 to Giuseppe Garibaldi, the well-known Italian patriot who helped to unify Italy. In 1946 it was renamed the Square of the Republic when the population of Italy voted to become a republic from the previous Kingdom of Italy. On both sides of this square were old horse chestnut trees and in front was the old elementary school. This square was a place where the villagers assembled to socialize and to sit in the hot summer days under the shade of the old trees, sipping cold drinks sold from a wooden kiosk. Another smaller square, the Square of the Remembrance, is dedicated to the village soldiers fallen in WWI and WWII. The third square inaugurated in 1989 was dedicated to the village's washerwomen, a trade practiced by the women of Asciano long before 1286 until the use of washing machines in the last decades of the 1900s made this trade obsolete.[7].

Until the 1920s, when the electric light was introduced in Asciano, strategic points on the streets of the village were illuminated by petroleum and later by acetylene lights. In 1872 a musical band was founded in Asciano that had forty-five instruments. It was an important group, providing entertainment and contributing to the social and cultural life of the village until the middle of the 1950's.

From ancient times until the beginning of the 1900s the road to Pisa was an unpaved road and there was no public transportation. To get to Pisa the villagers had to walk; to transport materials they used carts pulled by horses or donkeys. On Mondays the road had a procession of washerwomen using hand-pulled carts to bring the clothes to be washed from Pisa to Asciano, and on Saturdays, to take the clean clothes back to the city.

Until 1920 the use of a bicycle was considered a luxury. A stagecoach pulled by horses was available that could be used only by the rich, and later in the 1920s there was a small motor-van. To have a ride on either of these vehicles, one had to reserve a place at least one day before, because the number of passengers was limited. The motor-van transportation was in use until the 1940s. Only in 1945 was a bus introduced as public transportation connecting the neighboring villages of Calci, Agnano, and Asciano to Pisa.[8]

One of the oldest topographical problems at the piedmont of the Pisani Mountains was a swamp created by geological changes in the land surface, obstructing the rain and springs water coming down the mountains from flowing out to the sea. The records show that through the centuries several attempts were made to free the waters and to reclaim the marsh. One noted attempt was made in 1096 to make a ditch toward

the sea. Another was attempted in the 1500s. Cosimo I de Medici attempted to free the waters on the territory of Asciano and the neighboring villages, but was unsuccessful, although the scientist Galileo Galilei participated in one of these canal projects. But between 1929-1934 new hydraulic and engineering knowledge and technology allowed a network of canals to be built; these interconnected water-retaining reservoirs and water-scooping machines to regiment the waters and to exsiccate the swamps.

Before the swamps were exsiccated they were used only as pasture for wild cattle mostly owned by the big landowners. Besides providing meat the cattle skins were used to make leather that, as appears in the records, was used in the flourishing leather industry in Pisa. Another product indispensable for the leather industry was myrtle, shrubs that are abundant on Mount Pisano; the peasants of Asciano collected it for additional family income.[9]

The higher part of Mount Pisano was always covered with tall trees of various types, including oak, helm oak, cork-oak, beech, cluster pine, and chestnut. Some types were, or remained, more prevalent than others at different periods. The abundance of various trees provided the villagers with wood for building homes and simple peasant furniture, as well as for cooking and heating. Chestnuts were collected to be consumed as food. Less than 400 meters above sea level, where the climate was mild, olive trees had been cultivated since antiquity. Olive oil was one of the major products in Asciano and in the neighboring villages, and making it was the most important occupation of the peasants in that region. The oil was of very good quality and, besides being used by the peasants' families; it provided income from its sale on the market. On the lower portion of the slopes of Asciano there were small vineyards, and wine was produced for local use and for the market. The land near the peasants' homes was cultivated as vegetable gardens and fruit trees for family use.

During the feudal times the agricultural economy of the villages in the region depended on a *Signor*, as the landlord was called. He was the absolute authority in the village. The landlord was giving the land in a feud to the peasants who cultivated it. For its use the peasants had to give the landlord a part of the crop in kind and to pay a part in money; in addition they had to provide some services for him. The landlord was supposed to protect the peasant and his family and to take care of them in case of illness and at old age. For this reason the peasants were settling near the castles and villas of their protectors, thus forming the villages. With the passing of time many peasants were able to purchase land from the landowners and cultivate their own land. Some peasants became sharecroppers and worked the land for a share of the crop.

From feudal times the village of Asciano was almost self-sufficient, as there were men who practiced various trades: carpenters, masons, millers, oil-mill crushers, shepherds, and terrace-builders, who did build the terraces on the steep slopes of the mountain for the cultivation of the olive trees, and, after the 1920s there were the bicycle repairmen. Also there were washerwomen and washermen who engaged in the trade that provided income for their families.

Asciano had two grain mills that worked with the torrential water-power, and it had four oil mills that used the water-power to crush the olives and press the oil; in addition it had six oil mills that used the strength of the men or the donkeys to do this work. At present electric motors are used for this purpose.[10]

Through the years Asciano became a very large village and was self-sufficient by

having various shops and artisans that served the major needs of the villagers. Some of the shops in the village were: grocery shops, haberdashery shops, butcher shops, wine shops and bars, soft-drink and beer shops, and wood shops. The artisans were: barbers, shoemakers, clogmakers, tailors, blacksmiths, shoeingsmiths, and carters. Through the years there were different people that owned the shops or conducted artisan trades and some of the names from the past 80 to 100 years can be found in the written records, or remembered by the older folks. Among the names of the shopkeepers and the artisans of Asciano are several ancestors and relatives of Giulio Verro, including Beppe, or Giuseppe Franchini, his maternal grandfather who was a shoemaker. There were also other relatives recorded, such as Fiora Cortopassi, who had a wine shop, and Scarsi, who sold beer and soft drinks; also mentioned in the records was a merchant Bongianni, who had a butcher shop in Asciano in the years 1914-1915.[11]

Giulio's maternal ancestry can be traced to the beginnings of the 1800s, the time when the written records from the archives of the Commune of San Giuliano Terme were found for the Franchini family tree[12]. The records show that in 1832, in Asciano, Valentino Franchini, Giulio's maternal great-grandfather, was born. He was a son of Antonio Franchini and Rosa Conti. The records also show that in 1847, in Asciano, Natalina Beconcini, Giulio's maternal great-grandmother, was born. She was a daughter of Giuseppe Beconcini and Serafina Orsini.[13]

Five children were born from the marriage of Valentino Franchini and Natalina Beconcini. In 1868 the oldest son Giuseppe Franchini, Giulio's maternal grandfather, was born; in 1886 twin daughters Rosa and Fiorina Franchini were born; in 1893 son Guido Franchini was born, and in 1894 the youngest son, Luigi Sirio Franchini. No further records were found for these two younger sons.[14] Fiorina Franchini married Amerigo Cortopassi[15] and Rosa Franchini married Attilio Ruperti,[16] and the records of these two sisters family-tree branches can be found on the "Franchini Family Tree." Giuseppe Franchini married Maria Anna Bertini, Giulio's maternal grandmother.

The ancestry of Maria Anna Bertini can also be traced to the early 1800s, to her paternal grandfather Antonio Bertini; he had a son Gustavo Bertini; Maria Anna's maternal grandfather, Taddeo Lorenzini, had a daughter Elvira Lorenzini. The dates of birth of these ancestors and grandmothers' names could not be established. Gustavo Bertini had married Elvira Lorenzini and they had five children; for three of them, Maria, Ardeconda, and Amerigo, no further record was found. One daughter, Santina Bertini, had married Angelo Cervelli. And another daughter, Maria Anna Bertini was born in 1867 and at birth was called as Maria Paolina Annina.[17]

Giuseppe Franchini and Maria Anna Bertini had four children. In 1888 the oldest daughter Elvira Franchini was born; two years later, in 1890 the older son Pietro Franchini was born; in 1896 the younger daughter Egeria Franchini was born; and in 1905 the youngest son Duilio Franchini was born.[18] Elvira Franchini had married Pietro Scarsi,[19]. Pietro Franchini remained unmarried; Duilio Franchini had married Virginia, a woman from the village of Melazzo located near the city of Turin in the Piedmont region in Northern Italy.[20] The life story of Giulio's mother, Egeria Franchini, is described in the separate chapter.[21]

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1. Aldo Tratzi, *Asciano E La Sua Storia* [in Italian] (Pisa, Italy: Europrint, 1992). Selected historical information, trans. by Olga Gladky Verro, 1996.

2. Ibid., 23.
3. Ibid., 27-42.
4. Ibid., 42-77.
5. Ibid., 133-136.
6. Ibid., 83-94.
7. Ibid., 95-110.
8. Ibid., 116.
9. Ibid., 118-137.
10. Ibid., 123-141.
11. Ibid., 123.
12. Paolo Pieracci, “Franchini’s Family Tree,” genealogical chart researched in the archives of Commune of San Giuliano Terme and from the local relatives and neighbors, Asciano, 1994. Further annotated as Franchini Family Tree.
13. Franchini Family Tree, Foglio 1.
14. Ibid., Foglio 6.
15. Ibid., Foglio 5.
16. Ibid., Foglio 2.
17. Ibid., Foglios 2 and 4.
18. Ibid., Foglio 4.
19. Ibid., Foglio 7.
20. Ibid., Foglio 8.
21. See the chapter “Dea Egeria.”

Dea Egeria

As Recounted by Giulio Verro
Translated and Edited by Olga Gladky Verro

The second daughter of Beppe[2] Franchini[3] and Anna Bertini Franchini was born on November 23, 1896 in the county of San Giuliano Terme, village of Asciano[4] near the town of Pisa in Tuscany Region of Italy. The village doctor gave her the name Egeria, a very unusual name to be given to a daughter of a poor, ordinary village couple. However, Egeria was among the many children in Asciano who were given uncommon names. This trend began shortly after the new doctor arrived in the village and established his practice there. It seems that parents of one newborn baby asked the doctor, "Signor Doctor, what should we name our baby?" The good doctor looked at the newborn and gave him the name of someone who was renowned in the past and he recounted the story of that famous person to the parents.

The news that the doctor had given a fancy name to the baby spread very quickly in the village and from that time on many parents in Asciano asked the doctor to name their newborns. It appears that the village doctor enjoyed giving unusu¬al names to the newborns and that he liked to tell the parents stories about the historical, religious, or mythological figures who had those names in the past.

That's how it happened with Beppe and Anna when they asked the doctor to give a pretty name to their younger daughter. They listened with wonder to the story from Roman mythology about a nymph Egeria, a nature goddess who advised and dictated the laws to Numa, the second king of Rome. From this entire story Beppe and Anna, who were simple villagers, retained only a notion that their daughter was named after *Dea Egeria*, or the goddess Egeria, and this nickname stuck with her.

When she was a child, the family and relatives used this nickname to make fun of her and tease her. As she became a teenager and later a young maiden, her peers and other villagers made fun of her by calling her Dea Egeria. It was nothing unusual, since it was a notorious custom in Asciano, as well as in the whole region of Tuscany by the people of lower class, to give funny and sometimes derisive nicknames to others. And it was considered smart to tease the fellow villagers. At least her nickname was not funny and, as she was growing up and perceived that this name belonged to a superior creature, she became even proud of it.

Egeria, her sister, Elvira, and their brothers, Pietro and Duilio, all attended the village's elementary school and were able to read, write, and use a rudimentary arithmetic. Later, as was customary in those days, the Mother sent Egeria to the nuns to learn some sewing and knitting, skills that were considered useful for girls. She mastered knitting skills very well. Then she became an apprentice to the village seamstress for a while, where she learned enough to be able to sew simple items of clothing for herself and the family. By the time Egeria matured into a healthy-looking and neat maiden the young men began to notice her, and the villagers complimented Beppe and Anna about their younger daughter, who had blossomed into "*un campione*

di ragazza", which was a colloquial expression of praise—"a fine specimen of a girl."

All this attention and the perception she had about Dea Egeria influenced her self-assurance and gave her a touch of vanity; it was as if she had somehow inherited with the nickname the spirit of that mythical deity. She kept her head high and did not hide that she was proud of herself.

Egeria was slightly more than average height. Her oval face had a fresh, youthful complexion and pleasant features. She had a small, slightly turned-up nose and narrowly shaped eyes, which seemed even narrower from her way of keeping them half-open, as she was bestowing a favor on someone by looking at them. Everything in her demeanor alluded to her confidence that she deserved the attention and the privilege to choose among the best eligible young men in the village of Asciano. This attitude was in discord with the status of her family, who was poor, had no property that she could inherit, and could not afford to give her a decent personal dowry.

She knew this well from the example of her older sister Elvira, who married the widower Pietro Scarsi.[5] Pietro was from a better-off Ascianese family, his father had property, and there was a lot of discontent in his family because he took a wife from a have-nots family. But Anna and Beppe were happy that their not-so-pretty, but robust and hard-working, daughter Elvira had settled down with a man who had his own house with some adjacent land for a vegetable garden, some fruit trees, a hen coop, and a modest olive grove on a terrace on the slope of the mountain. In addition, he could expect to inherit more after the death of his father, whose property would be divided among the three children. Anna was hoping that her younger daughter Egeria, being much better looking than her older sister Elvira, could find a well-to-do husband even though her family was poor.

Egeria's father, Beppe Franchini, was a good-natured, calm, simple man. He worked long hours as a village shoemaker, but his earnings were barely enough to feed and clothe his family and to pay for the rent on the small house where he, his wife, and their four children lived, and where he worked. It was no wonder, because in those days everything in the shoemaking trade was done by hand with simple hand tools, and it took him the entire week to make one pair of shoes. But Beppe liked his trade because his customers appreciated his work, and because it was not as hard as working the land or any other trades that required physical strength. Besides, in good weather he could work outside sitting on a low stool near the front door of the house and, as he was working, he could see villagers passing by. They saluted him and some stopped to exchange a few words, or to chat longer if they had no urgent business to take care of. Every Saturday an old villager, Tangheroni, stopped and saluted him. "Oh, Beppe, we are again on Saturday!" And, as Beppe would continue to work on a shoe, they would chat for a while exchanging the village's news.

Egeria's mother, Anna, was helping some washerwomen in the village to do the laundry for their clients from Pisa,[6] which added to the family income. She was able to make ends meet with whatever money they had and to feed the family by preparing economical meals, such as chick peas, beans, or lentil soups, and homemade pasta with tomato and pork sausage sauce. She could not afford to buy meat every day, even if she bought the cheapest cuts. Occasionally Anna sent her daughter Egeria to the butcher shop, where the butcher Bongianni knew what cuts of meat the family could afford.

Butcher Bongianni noticed Egeria blossoming from an insignificant teenager into an attractive maiden. He began to pay more attention to her and to flatter her with compliments, which Egeria received with pleasure. Her mother noticed that when she sent her daughter to the butcher shop she was returning with much more meat and better cuts than would be expected for the money she gave her. Indeed, Bongianni was very generous to her daughter compared to what he gave her when she herself went to the butcher shop.

Anna saw the opportunity to use the butcher's partiality to her daughter, and she encouraged Egeria to "be good to Bongianni" and accept his compliments graciously. She told her that there was nothing wrong with flirting with him a little, because Bongianni was a married man and had four young children—the oldest was ten or twelve years old—and it was flattering for him to have the attention of a young maiden.

But Egeria didn't tell her mother that she was already doing all she was encouraging her to do. And that she was doing it not because he was giving her more or better cuts of meat, but because she was flattered by his attention. Bongianni was a mature and attractive man; he had good manners compared to the young men in the village and his compliments meant a lot to her. She couldn't tell all this to her mother. But her mother's encouragement to be good to Bongianni was now an excuse for Egeria to stay longer in the butcher shop without being reprimanded by her mother.

Bongianni was not made of wood, and one day he couldn't overcome the temptation to possess the young maiden and he seduced her. But soon after it happened he became frightened of the possible consequences. He was a good and loving father and felt for his wife more than just a simple affection. His conscience, although too late to undo what had happened, didn't allow him to continue the flirtation with the young girl.

Egeria couldn't understand the sudden change in Bongianni's behavior and tried to restore the happy flirtations with him. But she was unsuccessful, even though he continued to give her generous cuts of meat.

Time was not standing still and soon Egeria's body began to show changes that could not be concealed any longer from her mother and from the small world of the village. The gossip spread quickly and people asked, "Who did it?" But no one could be sure because the war[7] was going on and many young men from Asciano had been drafted and sent up north to the front to fight. People guessed that maybe the culprit was among them. However, the Mother finally forced her daughter to tell her the name of her seducer.

Beppe and Anna confronted Bongianni to admit that he was the father of the child to be born to their daughter. Anna insisted that he should provide for both the mother and the child and threatened him that she would tell to his wife everything.

Suddenly the terrible news spread in Asciano, "The butcher Bongianni killed himself." The villagers were puzzled. "His business was good. What happened to him? Why did he do it?"

When Egeria heard the blood-curdling news from the neighbors, she fainted, revealing her secret. It was the second time in a few months that her destiny was affected by Bongianni's unfortunate choice of behavior. This time the blow was much more tragic than the first one, when she found out that she would have his child. At least before she had hope that the child would have a father who in some way could

help him, but now this poor baby was fatherless before he was even born. It took Egeria some time to recover from this tragedy in her life, but her strong character helped her to regain self-assurance. She said to herself, “This baby will be born and I will take care of him.”

Bongianni’s wife told Egeria that her husband had confessed to being the father of the child to be born and asked her forgiveness. The remorse toward the two women and his children had led him to the act of weakness because he didn’t have the courage to confront the situation. To spare himself, his wife, and his children from the scandal, he chose the easy way out.

It was Bongianni’s wife who was the most sympathetic to the young girl whom her husband had wronged. She was generous in helping Egeria, mostly with food, before and after the child was born. However, as soon as she found a buyer, she sold the butcher shop and the house and moved from Asciano to spare herself and her children from the humiliation. She knew well that the populace of that small village could be cruel, that it didn’t forget the human weaknesses and mistakes for long time; gossip passed from one generation to another. She knew that the villagers could make the life of adults and children miserable by their disdainful attitude, contemptuous treatment, and by teasing with scornful nicknames.

Three days before Christmas, on December 22, 1915, a son was born to Egeria Franchini in the hospital in Pisa. She named him Giulio. Because Egeria was not married, she couldn’t give the last name of the father. The nuns who registered the newborn gave him the last name Orchidei. Egeria returned to Asciano with her son Giulio to live with her mother and father. For less than one year she took care and breastfed her baby -boy.

At that time her older brother Pietro had just returned from France as did many Italians during World War I. He had gone there a few years before in search of higher wages. He returned home as a very changed man. He never told anybody what happened to him there, except that he occasionally mentioned that a Catholic priest befriended him. Before, Pietro’s attitude toward the church, religion, and God was just a matter of custom, rather than a devotion or faith. This attitude was very common among the populace of this region in Tuscany and could be traced way back to the dark period of middle ages, when the people suffered from the invasions, pestilence, floods, and famine, and through the years it was past from one generation to another. When Pietro returned from France his attitude had completely changed—he became a devout Catholic and a deeply religious man.

Upon his return home, Pietro went up north to the city of Turin in the Piedmont region, where at that time the automobile industry had created many opportunities at the FIAT[8] and in the small shops that were auxiliary to that big industry.

From Turin Pietro wrote to his sister that he had found work and would soon resume sending money home, as he had done before from France; then their mother would not need to supplement the family income by working for the washerwomen, a job that was becoming hard for her age. He suggested to Egeria that if she could leave her baby with her mother in Asciano, he could find work for her in Turin. He mentioned that she could earn higher wages in Turin and have a better job than in the village and with her earnings could help her mother to take care of her son. Anna and Beppe agreed that this solution was in the best interest of all concerned, especially for Egeria, who

could have a better chance to find a husband there than in Asciano, where her reputation was tarnished.

Pietro mailed her money for the train tickets and in the fall of 1916 she left Asciano with a small bundle containing her clothes, a couple of towels, a set of bed linen, and a blanket. When Egeria arrived in Turin, Pietro placed her in a job as a waitress in a small family restaurant where he had been eating every day since he arrived in town and the woman owner knew him to be a reliable man. He knew the woman well enough to entrust his sister to her, because she offered her a place to live as well.

Egeria worked hard and the owner of the restaurant appreciated her very much. Egeria was sending money regularly to her mother for the support of her baby boy and was able to make some trips to Asciano to see Giulio, to whom she had become attached. She diligently knitted in the evenings after her chores in the restaurant were done. She made him sweaters, socks, and hats and also sewed pants and shirts for him so that he would be well dressed. When she was visiting her son in Asciano, she proudly showed him off by walking with him in the village.

The family restaurant where Egeria worked was mostly patronized by workingmen; some were local and some were immigrants from other regions of Italy where jobs were scarce, so they came to Turin to earn money. Most of the men were either bachelors or, if they were married, they had left their families in their native villages or towns. It was an ideal place for Egeria to find a husband, and she had several admirers who were seeking her favors. But she had good advisers, the woman who owned the restaurant and her brother Pietro, who was eating there. They scrutinized each man who seemed to be interested in Egeria and looked first at his intentions and then considered his potential as a good husband and provider for the family. It was not easy to find a man who could qualify as a husband with such strict requirements.

It took a long time until one eligible young man began to court Egeria and his qualifications were approved unanimously. He was from a well-to-do family, Egeria liked him, and he asked her to marry him. When Pietro, in the presence of Egeria, presented him with the fact that she had an illegitimate son, it didn't bother him at all, and he said that he would take good care of him. But when Pietro asked if he would adopt the boy, the answer was a categorical "no" because his family would not approve of giving their name to a child who was not from their bloodline. However, he offered an excellent financial arrangement for her son. He said that he would pay Egeria's mother to take care of the boy until he reached school age. Then he would send the boy to a very good private boarding school and, if the boy was smart, he would pay for his further education; otherwise, he would send him to learn a good trade.

He said that Egeria could visit her son as often as she wanted and would have enough money to provide for all the boy's needs. But the boy could not live with them because it would eventually become known to his family and relatives, as well as to their circle of friends, that his wife had an illegitimate child. This was considered dishonorable and would reflect on his whole family, especially on his unmarried sisters' chances to marry into a good family. And his parents would never forgive him for this. Therefore, it should remain a secret between him and Egeria.

Pietro understood that the situation was becoming too complicated for his sister to make a decision immediately and he replied that Egeria would need some time to sort out all those conditions before giving to him a definite answer.

Pietro and Egeria consulted with the woman who owned the eating-place where she worked. They disagreed on the advantages and disadvantages of conditions that this man was offering her. Pietro told his sister that it was very important that her son would be adopted and have the same last name as her other children born from this marriage, thus preserving the secrecy that he was born as an illegitimate child.

The woman was more practical. She was very impressed with such a generous offer by the man to provide for all the financial needs of bringing up the child, especially the cost of placing the boy in a good boarding school and a promise to pay for his further schooling as long as the boy's abilities would allow him to profit from it. Besides that, Egeria would be marrying a well-to-do man who would give her a comfortable life and the means of elevating herself and her son from the hardships of poverty.

The last word, however, was up to Egeria. She said that during these few years she had become very fond of her son and as a mother she wanted to have him close to her. The idea of keeping her son away from her and from her future family, and especially of sending him away to a boarding school, meant a permanent separation. Also she wanted her son to have a father and have his name. This way she would not have to give him any explanations about who his real father was.

Therefore, when the man came for the answer to his marriage proposal, Egeria told him that she couldn't marry him. She explained that she would wait to marry a man who would adopt her son Giulio and who would not be afraid to give him his name, who would be willing to be a father for her son, and would allow her to keep her son close to her.

The man was very surprised to hear her answer but he didn't change his previous offer, which he considered to be very generous. And before leaving he told Egeria that one day she would regret her refusal to marry him.

When the woman who owned the eating-place understood Egeria's reasoning, she decided to talk about her with her nephew Ermengardo. Since he had returned from the war,[9] he had been coming occasionally to eat in his aunt Margarita's place. As a war veteran he got a good job at the Turin's Municipal Streetcar Enterprise as a streetcar conductor collecting fares from the passengers. He told her that now that he had a steady and secure job he wanted to settle down, find a good wife, and start a family.

She didn't tell him at first about Egeria, because of her well-to-do admirer. But once Egeria dismissed him, she decided to be a matchmaker for her nephew Gardo as she called him for short. She told him that she had just the right woman for him—young, pleasant, neat, and hard-working—her waitress Egeria. She told him that Egeria had just dismissed a well-to-do young man who wanted to marry her because he refused to adopt her son who was born out of wedlock. She told her nephew that, if adopting Egeria's son was not a problem for him, and, if they liked each other, she would even pay for their wedding.

Ermengardo began to visit his aunt's eating-place more often and remained there after closing time when Egeria would finish her chores. It didn't take long for them to realize that it was their destiny to get married.

In the summer of 1920 the wedding of Ermengardo Verro and Egeria Franchini took place in her native village of Asciano. His aunt Margarita kept her word and paid for all the expenses. She did for them even more: she helped them to set up their ménage.

Giulio recalls that he was almost five-years-old at that time, and remembered this

big event vividly all his life.

"My mother dressed me in a brand new suit and shoes. My mother and lots of people were all dressed up in festive clothing. There was much confusion and I couldn't understand what was going on. During the reception my mother took me by the hand and led me to the man, whom I never saw before, and said, 'Giulio, this is your father. Give him a kiss.' The man bent down and I, who was a very obedient boy, kissed him on the cheek. My mother instructed me, 'You shall call him Babbo.'[10] There were many people who were watching this scene of my first encounter with my father and I became shy and ran away to look for my grandfather.

"One old woman stopped me and looking straight into my eyes said, 'Listen Giulio, that man is not your father! Your father was a butcher Bongianni and he is dead!' I could never forget this woman and what she told me. Many times during my childhood and teenage years I wanted to ask my mother about it, but I was afraid. I thought that one day she herself would tell me if it was true. But she didn't; she probably considered that I was too young to know about it. But I perceived that this was a taboo and never talked about it with anybody.

"Leaving Asciano, my mother told me, 'As soon as we settle down with your father, I will come and take you to live with us in Turin where you will go to school.' This was the best news for me because every time she came to see me she would go away again. I wished that one day my mother would take me and I would remain living with her forever."

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1. Also as recounted to Giulio Verro by his mother, Egeria Franchini Verro, and their relatives, ed. and trans. from Italian by Olga Gladky Verro, 1995-1997. See the chapters "Chance, Destiny or the Will of God" and "Repatriation."
2. Nickname for Giuseppe (Joseph, in English).
3. See the chapter "The Village of Asciano."
4. Ibid.
5. "Franchini's Family Tree," Foglio 7.
6. Aldo Tratzi, Asc., 123.
7. World War I, 1914-1915.
8. *FIAT* – acronim for *Fabrica Italiana Automobili di Torino*
9. World War I.
10. Dad in Italian.

Chapter 4

Giulio's Years Of Growing Up

As Remembered by Giulio Verro
Translated and Edited by Olga Gladky Verro

It was a great joy for me when my mother came to the village of Asciano, where I lived with my grandparents, to take me to Turin to live with her and her husband, who, as she told me, was my father.[1]

I was about four-and-half years old and had never been in the big city. It was a great adventure for me to travel on the train and on the streetcar. An even greater surprise for me was to climb the four flights of stairs in the huge apartment building in Corso Novara, where my mother lived on the fifth floor. The apartment was at the end of a long balcony with several doors to other apartments and one to the communal latrine. The apartment had two rooms; one was a kitchen where I had a couch to sleep on, and another was my mother and father's bedroom with a huge bed.

From the day of my arrival in Turin, my greatest fear was that one day she would send me back if I displeased her. I remember that as a child I always waited with great anticipation for her rare visits to see me in Asciano, and I never had enough time to have her near me. She was always telling me that she could not stay very long because she had to go back to the big city where she worked. As I remember, my greatest desire was that she would take me to live with her forever. Therefore, when my wish came true and she took me to live with her, I was always afraid to upset her or my father in any way, because to discipline me she used to scare me, "If you are disobedient, I would send you back to Asciano to live with your grandparents."

In the 1930s in Italy, as in the rest of Europe, there was an economic crisis. The small factories and shops were either closing or reducing their work, and even FIAT[2] and other large factories had lowered their production and reduced their workers schedule to two or three days a week. Four of my mother's cousins,[3] Mario and Oberto Cortopassi, Enrico Macchi and his brother Alberto, who worked at the Villar Perosa,[4] were working only three days a week. Their families had a very hard time making ends meet.

I remember one occasion that remained memorable in our family long after those hard times had passed. It was the day before Christmas and all my mother's cousins decided to have a holiday dinner with all the families together in our apartment. My mother and her cousin Dina Macchi made meat ravioli, which was a traditional Christmas dish in Turin. They had to make enough dough to make ravioli for eight adults and four children. Well, to save some money Dina insisted on using only one egg to the dough, which had to be rolled very thin and stuffed with chopped meat. My mother argued that the dough would break once the ravioli was put into boiling water. I don't remember who won that argument; I think it was my mother, because we ate good ravioli on that Christmas day.

My father who worked for a city owned Municipal Streetcar Enterprise, called

ATM,[5] as a streetcar conductor selling tickets to the passengers was considered to be lucky to have a steady job and a reliable income. However, my mother helped to add some extra money by working at home. She took precut items from a vendor in the central city market of Porta Palazzo and sewed work pants all day long, pedaling the treadle sewing machine with her feet.

From an early age I had to help my mother with many chores, such as cutting the loose threads from the finished pants, preparing the meals under her step-by-step instructions, washing the ceramic tile kitchen floor, dusting the furniture, and watching my baby brother Domenico, who was six years younger. I always tried very hard to please my mother and did all my chores without complaining. I learned to take each chore as a kind of a game I was playing, but sometimes it didn't work as I expected, as it happened one day when I was about seven or eight years old.

One afternoon my baby brother Domenico, who was sleeping in the darkened bedroom, began to cry. My mother was in the kitchen pedaling the sewing machine. She told me to go in the bedroom and rock the baby in his cradle. I went into the dark room, sat on the floor near the cradle, and began to rock it first very slowly, but my brother continued to cry. Well, I started to push it a little bit more and the cradle was swinging higher; then I pushed it harder and harder and the cradle was swinging higher, and higher... Suddenly I saw the baby fly out of the cradle and heard his frightened shrill cry as he landed on the ceramic tile floor almost under my parents' big bed, and he stopped crying.

My mother rushed into the bedroom screaming, "What happened?! What happened?!" Terrified, I was able only to point with my finger at my brother lying on the floor. "Oh, my God! Oh, my God!" It was all my mother could exclaim as she lifted the baby. Seized with panic, she ran with him on the balcony to *Madama*[6] Ferro, our next-door neighbor, to get help. I followed her and stopped on the balcony near the open door watching to see what would happen.

The woman took the baby from my mother and gave him a few light slaps on his buttocks. I heard that baby began to cry again and my mother and our neighbor made a long sigh of relief. I quickly returned to our apartment and sat quietly on the chair expecting big punishment from my mother. But she was so relieved that my brother was not hurt, that she only admonished me for being so reckless with the baby and made me promise not to do it anymore.

One chore that I really hated was dusting with the rag the numerous spring coils on my parents' huge bed. I had to slip on my back into the narrow space between the floor and the bedsprings and dust each coil; the coils were secured with wire to wire net holding the wool mattress. No matter how careful I was, I usually scratched my hands against those wires. When the rag was full of dust, I would slip out from under the bed and go to the balcony to shake it out. I was trying to stay outside as long as I could before going back under the bed to finish my job. Even though I disliked the chore, I always did it without complaining to please my mother, always afraid that she would punish me and send me back to live with my grandparents in Asciano.

Of all my chores I liked helping my mother to cook most of all. She would tell me, "Giulio, take the small pan and put it on the table... Now, take the bottle with the oil and put a little oil in a pan. Show it to me, how much..." She would check it and approve it.

"Now, take an onion, peel it, and slice it on the wooden board. Be careful not to

cut your fingers." As I would finish slicing the onion she would say, "Good boy, you did very well. Now put the onion in the pan and put it on the stove. Take the wooden spoon and stir it once in a while so it will not burn..."

Then she would ask me if the onion was becoming transparent and order me to move the pan to the side of the stove and give me further instructions. "Now, take a glass and fill it half full of water. Take the jar with tomato paste and put two teaspoons of it in the glass and mix it well. Show it to me... Very well, good boy. Now, slowly pour it on the onion in the pan and put it back on low heat to cook the sauce..."

I liked to help my mother with cooking because she was giving me so much attention and praised me for a job well done. I was eager to please her and was especially happy to hear her approval of my work. Later, when I started to attend school I was still helping my mother to cook during my vacations, even after she stopped sewing workpants.

When I was about seven years old during the summer vacations my mother used to send me to our parish of San Gioachino to attend the catechism classes conducted by the nuns; there I had to learn the prayers and the Catholic dogma. I had to get ready for confirmation, which was performed[7] on May 17, 1923. Although it was supposed to be a religious Catholic custom, it became a festive occasion when the boys and girls were dressed in new outfits; their parents and relatives wore their Sunday clothes and attended the ceremony in the church. I remember for that occasion my father came in the church, which he very rarely attended, because, as I found out later, he didn't accept the church authority and didn't agree with the priests' preaching.

My father lived on his own from the time he was seven or eight years old, because he couldn't stand to live under his mother's authoritative rule. He earned his living by helping the cobblestone masons who were building the roads in the city and his job was rolling the stones for them. He slept in the baskets at the open market, or in the carts in the storage place where he worked. It was a hard life for the young boy, but he endured all to have the independence from his authoritative mother.

Although my father's schooling did not go beyond the first grade, he learned on his own how to read and write, and he learned how to count money while his mother kept him from infancy in the basket under the bench on the central market of Porta Palazzo, where she was a vendor of vegetables.

From his own experience he knew that it was not easy to find good work without education. Therefore, although our family could not afford to pay for our education in private schools, my father did his best to ensure that both my younger brother Domenico and I attended and graduated not only from elementary school, but also had some vocational training.

In the fall of 1922, when I was six-and-a-half years old, my parents enrolled me in the very good private elementary school for boys named *Fratelli Delle Scuole Christiane,* or The Brothers of the Christian Schools, which was conducted by the Catholic priests who were in charge of teaching. The first five years the boys could attend the school free, without paying any tuition.

The priests were very severe with the discipline in school and some were more quick then the others to punish by slapping our hands with a long thin ruler, which hurt a lot. Some other teachers preferred that our parents would punish us and were reporting even the smallest transgressions either by ordering us to tell our parents, or by giving us

a note.

I remember my good friend Aldo Mulinary, who was in my class and with whom I walked to and from school everyday. He lived in our apartment house in the corner apartment on the landing of the fourth floor where I lived. When we were returning home from school we often complained to each other, “When I return home, I would get spanked.”

“Me too.”

“For what?”

“I don’t know. For something.”

One day Aldo said, “I am tired of being spanked. Let’s run away from home.”

We discussed where we could go, but never did take this proposition seriously. But it gave us consolation that if things would become really bad, there was a way to escape from being spanked.

While Aldo and I were attending the elementary school, all students had to enroll in the Fascist Balilla[8] youth organization. Since our fathers, as many others, could not afford to buy us the black uniforms, we received them free, a shirt, a fez,[9] shorts, a neckerchief, and socks.

On Saturdays we had to attend obligatory meetings, during which we received the Fascist Party’s indoctrination. But we also marched outside, and had fun doing some gymnastics. We liked to go there because it was always better than staying at home on the balcony. Our mothers could not supervise us playing outside behind our apartment building and allowed us to go down to play in Via Favria only for a very short time. Via Favria was a narrow side street used only by some pedestrians, the women going to the public laundry, and neighborhood children to play. There, on the cobblestone pavement with the overgrown bunches of grass between the stones, we could stretch our legs by running and playing active games with a ball.

At about age twelve, we were promoted from the Balilla to the next level of the Fascist youth organization, which was called a Fascist Avanguardist. As before, on Saturdays, we had to attend obligatory meetings for indoctrination, and had some paramilitary type training and lots of marching.

Although my father was an anti-fascist at heart and a supporter of socialist ideas, he had to conceal this from us and from the others for the sake of maintaining his job with the city. But he felt that it was good for me to belong to the youth organization, where I was learning discipline and had some exercise under the supervision of adults.

When my brother Domenico and I were young, one type of recreation our family had, the same as many other workers’ families, was to have picnics on the shores of the small River Stura, the affluent of the River Po. This we could do only on some Sundays when my father had a day off. We used to go there with the family of our next-door neighbors by the name of Fascia and some of my mother’s cousins.

The place was quite far away from where we lived and it was possible to take a train. But the tickets for the whole family were too expensive and we had to walk. My mother would prepare some food, such as boiled eggs, or omelet, salad, and tomato sauce. Then we would take a big pot with us to boil spaghetti on the open fire. All this, and bread, dishes, forks, knives, glasses, and a tablecloth to put on the grass were placed in bags that each of us had to carry. We would get started early in the morning when the sun was not too hot. We would stay there all day long, bathe in the river, play

on the grass, and the adults would rest under the shade of the trees. All tired, but happy, we would return home in the evening. I remember that one time my mother took the train home alone, because she had cut her foot on a piece of glass in the river and couldn't walk.

These outings became very rare after the two families had a big fight over something that my mother could never forgive our neighbor for. I remember that after the fight my mother smudged the face of *Madama* Fascia on her photo.[10] After this fight my parents became very cautious in choosing their friends and, indeed, I don't remember that they ever had any more close friends. I remember that my father and my mother were often saying, "It is better not to have any friends, than to have bad ones." And my mother kept company only with her brothers Pietro and Duilio, and with her cousins,[11] Dina and Enrico Macchi, Derna and Oberto Cortopassi, and Mario and Iris Cortopassi, who lived in our neighborhood.

My father worked in shifts and he had only one Sunday off in five weeks. He liked to make that day a special day for the whole family. He would go in the morning to a delicatessen shop and buy an antipasto for lunch, usually 100 grams each of very thinly sliced cooked ham, cooked and hard salami, one can of sardines, and thinly sliced cheese, or in the winter a cream cheese called *mascarpone* to spread a thin layer on bread. For this occasion he would also buy a better quality of Barbera wine, which for us children was diluted with water. For us it was a real treat, because our family could not afford to have such delicacies every day.

Then in the afternoon we would all put on our Sunday clothes and walk to the center of the city and go to the first-class movie theater to see the newest movie that would not be shown for a long time in the second-class theaters in our neighborhood. After the movies, we would stroll under the portico of Via Roma admiring the beautiful things in the windows of the luxury shops, and in the warm weather we would stop at the ice cream parlor and have another treat, a small cone of ice cream. All this was done as a very solemn ritual, as if my father wanted to emphasize that he could afford once in a while to indulge in such luxuries even if he was only a simple streetcar conductor selling tickets.

When my father had a day off on weekdays, he would occasionally do some special jobs at home. My mother would dread that day in the spring. It was the time when he would clean the pipe that ran high near the ceiling the whole length of the kitchen from the wood-burning stove to the chimney wall.

Climbing on the ladder he would remove sections of the pipe, and clean them on the balcony over the newspapers. Then he would place them on the floor in a sequential order, starting at the chimney elbow piece, which he placed at the farthest end of the bedroom near the window, and finishing it near the stove. Although my mother would spread the newspapers on the floor, my father couldn't work neatly, as she wanted. Right from the start he would spill the black silt deposit from the pipe on the kitchen floor and stepping on it would bring it all over the floor in both rooms. My mother would get upset and admonish my father at each step. He would become upset with her for annoying him. And they would end by quarreling with each other.

After I graduated from fifth grade, I could attend a vocational school also conducted by the priests. To enroll their children, parents had to pay tuition. Although it was a great sacrifice for my family, my parents enrolled me in the vocational school,

because it was highly regarded as giving a solid vocational background through teaching not only in the classroom but also having hands-on experience in the workshop.

I remember that in that school I also learned a good lesson that I should not lie when some of my friends suggested it to me. It happened one day in the workshop when I came to the desk of our instructor to ask him about something. While I was waiting for my turn I took a small metal bell from his desk that he used to dismiss us at the end of the class. As I was playing with it, the bell suddenly fell on the concrete floor and the handle broke from it. The instructor wanted to teach me a lesson and ordered me to take it home and repair it. On my way home I complained to my friend who lived in the same apartment house on the ground floor. “How can I tell my father to give me the money for this? He will spank me for it!”

My friend offered me he would ask his father to repair it for me free since his father was a plumber. With relief I accepted his offer. The next day the bell was neatly repaired and my friend told me, “If the instructor asks you how much you paid for it, tell him that it costs you five liras.”

Well, I really didn’t know how much it might cost to do this repair and accepted his suggestion. My instructor was very impressed with such a good repair job and asked me how much I paid for it. “Five liras!” I answered promptly.

“It is not true,” said my friend loudly. He was standing next to me. “It costs him nothing. My father repaired it for him free of charge!”

I was humiliated, but found the courage to answer, “He told me to tell you that it cost five liras.”

The instructor understood the malicious trick that my friend played on me and told me, “Never tell a lie, especially when somebody else tells you to say it. I hope that you have learned a good lesson.” And he didn’t punish me for it.

After this incident I never spoke to this boy again for many years, and we lived in the same apartment house.

At the end of the first year in vocational school I failed the exams and my father decided that he would not pay for my tuition if I could not keep up with my studies there. Therefore, in the 1927-28 school-years my father decided to enroll me in the sixth grade day class of the Parini Municipal School, which was offering free education in the sixth, seventh, and eighth grades for those children who did not plan to further their education and were planning to go to work. The school also had evening classes for those teenagers who at the age of fourteen were starting to work during the day.

I still remember two of my teachers who left a great impression on me. One of them was an excellent teacher of mathematics by the name of Corna. He was able to make the math lessons so interesting and explained everything so well that everybody liked this subject. He was previously a professor of mathematics at the university, but lost his position because he didn’t want to join the Fascist Party. He had written and published his own booklet on Geometry and I kept it for many years.

I don’t remember the name of the other teacher, or the subject that he was teaching, but I could never forget how he taught us to use our reasoning. “Always use your head,” he used to say. “Not everything that is written and printed is always true. Everyone who is writing gives his own ideas. You should always use your own reasoning before accepting the ideas of others. With some you will agree and with others you may not agree.” It impressed me so much that since then I always used reasoning before I

agreed with anything I read.

When I was about twelve years old our school participated in a talent show for children of our city. I remember that I learned to recite very well the third sequence of poetry "*Il Parlamento*" by the famous Italian poet Giosue Carduccil. It began with the words: "*Signori Milanesi,' il consol dice, la primavera in fior mena tedeschi pur come d'uso."* And I was selected from my class to recite it on the big stage of the Carignano Theater. After my performance in front of so many people who applauded me, I fantasized often about becoming an actor. I remember, however, that I was very disappointed that my mother didn't come to hear my performance. When I asked her to come to the theater, she told me, "I am busy, I have to wash clothes today."

My mother always managed to save money to go every year with my little brother Domenico and me to visit her numerous relatives in the native village of Asciano. She was very ambitious—and she did it the same way as she had done before when I was a little boy—she paraded us dressed in new clothes[12] through the village streets to show us to the villagers.

When I became fourteen years of age, which at that time in Italy was the legal age to start working, my father found me a job. But, as I started to work, I also attended the third evening integrative course at the Parini School, which was equivalent to the eighth grade of the day classes at the same school. And I graduated at the end of the 1929-30 school year.[13]

My first job was in a very small artisan metal shop, where all day long I painted metal handles and performed errands or other simple tasks. I remember how my mother was upset when I was bringing home my work clothes to wash, because more paint was going on my overalls than on the pieces I was painting. At that time my mother had to stop sewing work pants because she had a miscarriage and after that had problems with her health and couldn't push the pedal of the treadle sewing machine with her feet all day.

From the time I began working I was helping my family with my earnings. I was bringing my weekly pay home to my mother and she was giving me a small weekly allowance, which was enough for me to buy a stick of sweet licorice.

When I was sixteen years old, I found work in another metal shop called after the name of its owner Diena. There my hourly pay was one-half of a lira and my weekly take-home pay was about eighteen liras. My mother increased my weekly allowance to one lira, which I could spend on anything I wished. However, there were not too many choices that I could make. It was enough to go to the movies once, or for sixty cents I could buy a small bar of a dark chocolate that I liked very much. The forty cents that I saved helped me to buy a small sports newspaper the next week; I still remember its name, "*Brivido Sportivo."*[14] It was printed in Florence on violet-colored paper, the color of the shirts of the Florentine[15] soccer team, of which I was a great fan. Many of my friends, who lived in the workers' neighborhood and who were able to find some place to work, also gave their wages to their families, as I did. We often compared our meager allowances and what we were able to buy with them each week.

I remember well one incident that happened to me when I worked at the Diena shop, which had a soccer team. Like most boys my age I wanted to play soccer. But no matter how much I asked my parents to allow me to play with the team, my father would not give me his permission. He told me, "Do you know how much it would cost us if you

have an injury? How would we pay for a doctor and a hospital? We cannot afford it!" In my family a decision made by my father was final and children were not allowed to question his reasons for it. Therefore, I had to be happy to be allowed on Sunday afternoons to watch team's game![16]

Since my mother was very ambitious about how her sons were dressed on Sundays, I had to put on my best clothes and shoes when I went there. One day, one team player for some reason couldn't play and I was asked to take his place. Of course I couldn't refuse such an occasion to help my team! They found me a jersey and shorts but I had to play in my best shoes. When I came home my mother couldn't believe what had happened to my Sunday shoes. Naturally, she gave me a good scolding and told me to go to bed before my father arrived home from his evening shift.

Since I was sleeping with my brother Domenico on the couch in the kitchen, I only pretended to sleep while listening to what she would say to my father. She prepared him slowly before telling him about what happened to me that Sunday and talked him into allowing me to play on the team. "The boy is sixteen years old, he needs some recreational activity," was her strongest argument and finally my father agreed to let me play on the team. I almost jumped for joy, but caught myself in time from revealing that I was listening, and only turned to another side.

Some boy from the team gave me his old shoes that were in very bad shape. Luckily by that time my grandfather Franchini and my grandmother were living with my uncle Pietro in Turin. Since he used to be a shoemaker, he was able to repair the shoes somehow, although there were more nails in the soles then the leather. Well, after I started to play on the Diena soccer team,[17] my father started to come to see me play on his free Sundays when he was not working.

Already in my teens I started to take books from the city library and read avidly all kinds of Italian and foreign authors and adventure novels about explorers in far away lands. I remember that when I was about sixteen years old I felt that I lacked knowledge of good manners and checked out a library a book with the title, "*Gianetto Impara A Vivere.*"[18] It was a simple story of an uncle who comes home from America and finds his young nephew Gianetto, who does not know good manners and slowly teaches him how to behave according to the customs of those days.

As I was reading that book I realized that in my working-class family good manners were limited to good behavior, respecting parents and other adults, and not telling lies. I was impressed with the book and tried to learn all the manners that Gianetto was learning from his uncle, and I consciously modified some of my manners. Later, as I became older, I read many books of classic authors and even attempted to read a book by the German philosopher Nietzsche, which I found very hard to read and understand.

After graduation from the eighth grade of the Parini School for three years I attended the private evening Alexander Volta School of Practical Electrotechnics,[19] from which I graduated when I was nineteen years old. My father often repeated his advice to me about finding for myself employment in public services with the city or state government, because they provided a stable and reliable work and income. At that time in Italy there was an economic depression and such jobs were impossible to find for a young man of nineteen years of age without a good sponsor. I began to seriously consider a military career. In October 1934 I enrolled in the evening course called Assemblers of Radio Equipment, which was offered in the School of Flight Engineers

and Aviation Assemblers. It was preparing radio-telegraphers for the military services in the Air Force and the Navy. In that school I met Signor Bargero, who was teaching a practical course in radio assembly.[20] Since he also lived in the same part of the city called Barriera di Milano, we often returned home on the same streetcar and he became very friendly with me. He was employed as an engineer with the big factory called Nebiolo[21] and had many contacts with other industries in our city of Turin.

As I was attending that school, I found out that, if I waited until I became twenty-one years old and was drafted into military service, as a draftee I would have no choice in selecting the branch of military service that I liked—I would have to go wherever the draft board assigned me. However, if I enrolled as a volunteer before that time, I could choose to go into the Air Force, which I considered to be more glamorous than the other branches of military service and I was attracted to the idea of being able to fly.

At that time one episode with my father made me realize not only the limitations in his education, but also his uncompromising, authoritarian, and hot-tempered character. It happened on one hot summer night. My father and I came out of our stuffy apartment and were standing on the balcony hoping to catch some air. The full moon was high above the roofline on the other side of our apartment building and was illuminating the balconies of the upper stories and keeping the courtyard below in deep darkness. My father commented with his usual authoritarian tone, “Look, Giulio, how big is the moon. If you think that we can see it from so far away, it certainly is bigger than the sun.”

“Oh, no, Babbo,” I corrected him promptly, “the sun is bigger than the moon!”

“Nonsense!” replied my father. “Look at that moon. Have you ever seen the sun that size?”

“No,” I answered, “The sun looks smaller because it is farther from the earth than the moon. But the moon is smaller.”

“I said that the moon is bigger!” Father raised his voice.

Being sure that I was right, I rushed into the kitchen, grabbed my science textbook and found a chart of solar system. Triumphantly I pointed this picture to my father, “Look here, Babbo, you can see that you are wrong.”

My father turned toward me and without looking at the book gave a good smack at my cheek while screaming, “Remember, your father is never wrong!”

Humiliated by being slapped wrongly and at that age, I retreated into the kitchen. Shaking her head my mother reproached me, “You never learn. You know well that you cannot argue with your father. Now you made him all upset. And it is bad for him and for you. It doesn’t cost you anything to agree with him, even if he is wrong.”

I didn’t even try to answer her. I took a book, sat on the chair and attempted to read, but my cheek was burning and for the first time I felt a rebellion against my father. Until now I considered that he was treating me fairly as a real father would treat his own child. I never felt that he was treating my brother Domenico, who was his own son, better than me. Of course, my brother was not as obedient as I was! However, now I could not justify my father treating me this way at my age. But my mother, why did she accept his behavior and admonish me as if I were wrong? This I couldn’t understand.

I understood that she adapted herself to accept his character and allowed him to feel as if he was always right in small matters, but on the important matters she worked on him slowly until she would achieve her goal. In money matters my father kept

himself a weekly allowance that was sufficient for him to stop daily in a bar to have a cup of coffee, a quart of good wine, cigarettes, and to have a haircut. In addition he was keeping some money to pay for the movies and antipasto for the whole family on those Sundays that he was not working. The rest of his weekly wages he was giving to my mother and allowed her to be responsible to make it last until the next pay-day and to save some money to buy shoes, clothing, and whatever else was needed for the family.

My mother knew how to handle his hot temper and uncompromising attitude. She allowed him to think that he was the authority in the family. And she taught us, the children, to accept this without questioning even when his decisions were arbitrary and uncompromising. And I truly respected my father.

Although my father left home as a child, he respected his relatives and when Domenico and I were young, he and my mother took us to visit his mother and his grandmother, Liatti. I remember that both grandmothers were very strict with us children and during our visits we were expected to salute them and then to sit quietly while the adults were talking. Then there was his aunt Margarita, with whom he and my mother felt closer than any of his other relatives. Also close to my father and mother was one of his cousins, whom we called Aunt Theresa. She had a daughter who had bright red hair and we called her a Redhead.

My father also maintained a relationship with his younger brother Renzo,[22] who according to some relatives was fathered by my father's uncle, his father's brother, whom his mother married after her husband died. Uncle Renzo visited us occasionally, but my father was not too close to him as one could expect two brothers to be.

Uncle Renzo was an itinerant merchant and, when he had a good week, especially during the carnival time, when he earned some money, he used to come to our home with lots of food for the whole family and sweets for us children. Uncle Renzo lived alone and used to explain that he never got married because all Verros, including him, had a very difficult character and it was better not to have a family and ruin the lives of a wife and children, as his brother Gardo was doing. And this reference made my father very angry and they argued a lot about it.

But Uncle Renzo had brought up one young orphan boy, whom he even financed to study in the seminary. But after the young man was sent to be a priest in the United States of America, Uncle Renzo never heard a word from him. All the relatives commented about him being the "ungrateful priest."

There was another branch of my father's relatives who were my father's cousins by the last name of Tiboldo. There were three brothers, Remo, Lindoro, and Giovanni, and two sisters, Maria and Marcellina. Maria was very attached to our family, especially to my mother, who occasionally visited her in the summers to rest in the cool mountain air and to bring home some fresh farmer's cheese.

They all lived in their native small mountain village of Tavigliano near the town of Biella in the Alps. Like most of the inhabitants of the neighboring villages, they all worked in the nearby town of Biella at the old and famous Barbisio Men's Hat Factory, producing hats from high quality wool felt. They also owned parcels of grazing land high in the mountains, where they raised sheep and made farmer's cheese from the sheep's milk; they preserved it in small earth cellars that were cool because they were located at the higher mountain altitude.

All of my father's relatives who lived in Turin were small merchants of one kind or

another. But my father was afraid to commit himself to commerce. My mother wanted to try to sell on the market and I remember a lot of arguing about it when somebody offered her to sell aluminum pots and pans as long as she bought a set of samples. But my father didn't want to even hear about it. He didn't want to take any risk that was involved in buying wholesale and reselling the merchandise. For many years after, my mother used to reproach him for not allowing her to try to make money that could have been handy for the family. And my father would answer her, "I am not sure about making money, but one thing I am sure, we would have had plenty of sample pots and pans stored under our bed."

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1. See the chapter "Dea Egeria."
2. *Fabrica Italiana Automobili di Torino* – The largest automobile factory in Italy.
3. "The Family Tree."
4. Large ball bearing factory in the City of Turin.
5. *Azienda Tramviaria Municipale* – Municipal Streetcar Enterprise.
6. In Piedmont's tradition and dialect, the oldest married woman in the family, such as the mother-in-law.
7. From the "Certificate of Confirmation."
8. From Giulio's photo in Balilla uniform.
9. A tapering cap with a tassel hanging from the crown.
10. From the photo made during one of the outings.
11. "Franchini Family Tree."
12. From the photograph made at a photo studio in Pisa.
13. From the copies of Giulio Verro 1927-28 school year "*Pagella Scolastica"* – the report card from Municipal School and 1929-30 school year certificate of the completion of the integrative course at the Parini School. Also, the photo of the students and faculty at the end of the year.
14. "Sport's Thrill."
15. Of the city of Florence in Tuscany region of Italy.
16. From the photo of workers team from the Diena shop after the soccer game.
17. From the photos of the Diena soccer team and the Diena workers after the soccer team competition.
18. "Gianetto Learns How to Live."
19. From the photo of the graduating class of 1933-34 school year. Also, from the copy of Giulio Verro certificate of license from the Alexander Volta School of Practical Electrotechnics. Also, from the photo of Giulio Verro at the age of 19
20. From a copy of teaching contract of Mr. Bargero from the School of Flight Engineers and Aviation Assemblers as an instructor at the School. A copy provided by Elsa Bargero Rivelli, a daughter of Signor Bargero.
21. Nebiolo was a manufacturer of equipment and printing machines for print shops.
22. Nickname for Lorenzo.

Chapter 5

Volunteer In The Italian Air Force

As Remembered by Giulio Verro
Translated and Edited by Olga Gladky Verro

In the last days of March 1935 I enrolled as a volunteer in the Italian Air Force without waiting to graduate from the preparatory course in radiotelegraphy and with the approval of my parents. I would have liked to become a pilot, but to be accepted for pilot training a diploma from at least lower middle school was required. I didn't have it. So I had to settle for specializing in radiotelegraphy, for which I already had several months of theoretical study.

On April 2, 1935 I arrived at the Air Force School for Specialists in Capodichino,[1] where I joined a group of about two hundred students in an intensive course in radiotelegraphy. Like all radiotelegraphers students I was assigned the lowest military rank of *Aviere.*[2] However, at the school we had very limited training on the airplanes, which was conducted by a division of Autonomous Section of Flight. According to the records in my Personal Book of Flight[3] I had completed only five hours and twenty minutes of practice in flight, which was documented on the twenty-second of July, 1935 by Cornell Carlo Grillo, a Commandant of the School for Specialists.

In addition to my technical training in School for Specialists, I suddenly became exposed to all kinds of people and experiences that could be found only in the military environment. Until my enrollment in the air force I had lived with my family; they were strict with me and I had limited experience with people outside of my family, except in the schools I attended, in the neighborhood where I lived, and factories where I worked. My mother kept me accountable of all my whereabouts during my free time in the evenings and on weekends. Maybe it was for this reason that some of the episodes and peculiar people I encountered during the time I was in the military service have remained so vivid in my memory.

I remember one episode that happened during the first morning rally at the School for Specialists. All of us students were not used to such early wake-up calls and to the speed needed to wash up and dress oneself to be on time for the morning rally outside our living quarters.

That first morning Lieutenant Cioffi was losing his patience with the men who were late. When it appeared that all the men were finally standing in line, one young student wearing only pajamas ran out of a dormitory door. The new aviators standing at attention couldn't help themselves from exploding in laughter while the man in pajamas, without the slightest embarrassment, tried to get in line with the others.

Pointing angrily at the student in pajamas, Lieutenant Cioffi shouted with outrage in his voice, "To prison! To prison!" Then he inquired of the sergeant who was holding the list of new students, "What is his name?"

"That's ... Zaccaria," replied the sergeant.

On the first day Zaccaria went to military prison. Later he became well known under the name of Bum-Bum because of his habit of singing *sotto voce* to himself and one could hear only a rhythmic sound of "Bum-bum... Bum-bum..." as he was singing his tune.

On the first of December 1935 I graduated from the Air Force School for Specialists. It was a solemn occasion for the graduating students, commemorated in our class photograph[4] in front of the building of the Air Force School for Specialists in Capodichino.

Upon graduation, I was given the rank of Airman Radio-Telegrapher and my military pay was 127 liras a month. I kept the twenty-seven liras for my expenses and every month mailed one hundred liras to my mother for as long as I was in the service. I felt that, although I didn't live at home anymore, it was my duty to continue contributing to the family income, as I did before according to the rules established by my parents.

After completion of the course at the Air Force School for Specialists, all participants were sent to different locations to join the existing squadrons. I was assigned to join the 192nd Squadron of Terrestrial Bombardment and was sent there with a group of other airmen, including Zaccaria, who did not pass the exams in radiotelegraphy. At that time the 192nd Squadron of Terrestrial Bombardment was stationed at the Seaplane Base at Puntisella, not far from the town of Pola.[5] The commandant of the squadron was Captain Antonio Celotto.

As soon as we arrived at the base, we heard from the old-timers that the captain had been transferred there from a squadron of fighter planes where as a pilot he landed recklessly and broke the plane. After that incident he was given the nickname Antonio lo Scassa,[6] which stuck to him and, as long as I remember, the airmen under his command called him by that name among themselves.

At our arrival the commandant of the squadron assigned me as a radiotelegrapher to Plane Number 4. In a few days after our arrival the 192nd Squadron was transferred to another Seaplane Base, this time near Brindisi,[7] where we had our living quarters in a hangar next to the seashore. There we received training on the S.55 seaplanes, which were so old that they couldn't fly higher then one thousand meters. But on the average our flights were at altitudes between 200 and 500 meters.

At the base there were very few maintenance personnel and the crew had to pull the seaplane out of the water, place it on a platform with wheels, push the platform on the ground, and clean the seaplane. We were giving a hard time to the old warrant officer who was in charge of seaplanes maintenance. After the seaplanes were in place, we would run away, leaving the old man the cleaning task. He would come to the platform and bang on the boat-landing part assuming that we were hiding there and patiently say, "I saw you, I saw you... Get out from there and clean the plane..."

I remember also that Zaccaria was assigned as a helper to the mechanic who was servicing another seaplane in our squadron. The mechanic did try his best to teach Bum-Bum to help him clean the spark plugs in the motors of the planes. He patiently showed him how to remove them and place the parts in sequential order, explaining that this was important for putting them back together. Well, Bum-Bum always managed to mix up the order and scatter the parts all over. The mechanic repeatedly complained about this to the commandant of our squadron, Captain Cellotto, and told him that he could do it much quicker by himself, rather then getting all upset with that moron.

Finally, Captain called Zaccaria and told him, “The mechanic doesn’t want you anymore. I don’t know what to do with you. Commandant of the Base assigned you to me—I am responsible for you. So, do me a big favor, and be there every morning for the rally to be accounted for! After the rally I don’t want to know where you are and what you are doing. Just disappear and keep out of trouble; as long as I don’t hear complaints about you!”

Our squadron was stationed at the Brindisi Seaplane Base until the end of April 1936. Our assignments were to make recognizance flights of ships at sea, radiotelegraphic communications, and simulated raids and bombardments with fake bombs.

The rumors were that we were waiting for orders to be transferred further south, to the seaplane base in Augusta on the Island of Sicily,[8] to be closer to the Island of Malta.[9] At that time the Italian troops were conquering a colony for Italy in Africa and destroying the Ethiopian kingdom.[10] This act of aggression was not accepted favorably by many other European states; it especially resulted in political tensions between England and Italy. And there were rumors that Mussolini[11] was contemplating bombing English military bases on Malta in case of hostilities. Fortunately, that order never came and war with England was not declared at that time.

Being young and curious to see new countries and places that I knew only by name, in my imagination I expected all kinds of adventures and requested several times that the captain send me to Africa, but I was always denied the transfer.

“Why do you refuse to send me there?” I insisted, wanting to hear the reason from the Captain.

His answer was very simple, “I like to keep all good men with me. I send only troublemakers and slackers to Africa.”

So I remained in Brindisi and never had a chance to see Africa.

To find other entertainment beside playing cards, the enlisted men had to go from the base to the town of Brindisi. There, one could go to the movies, or spend an evening in a bar or cafe hoping to find the company of young women. But we soon found out that the southern customs were much different from those in northern Italy. In southern Italy the families strict relatives chaperoned their young girls and didn’t allow the young men to come close to them. Even in the movie theater they would sit the young girls between the two chaperones. The only women one could find in town were the women of easy virtue.

The seaplane base was located on a promontory into the sea with a narrow strip of water dividing it from the town on the mainland. To get into the town by land took a good hour and a half, but across the water it took about ten minutes of rowing by a fisherman on a small fishing boat. I remember that during the summer, at night, when we were returning from the town on the boat, as the old fisherman was rowing, the splashing of oars created an effervescent effect with the glittering droplets of water that, like a broken string of pearls, were falling and disappearing into the sea. This phenomenon was caused by some microscopic phosphorescent marine life particular to that narrow strip of water.

In June 1936 our squadron was transferred to the Military Airport Base at Poggio Renatico,[12] where we underwent training on the newest Savoia S.81, the three-engine heavy bombers. There we remained about one month waiting for the completion of the

new military airport in Forli,[13] which unofficially was called Mussolini's Airport because it was located not far from Mussolini's native village, Rocca della Caminate.

Finally, in the beginning of July 1936 we were transferred to the new military airport in Forli. There we were organized in an XXX Formation consisting of four squadrons, 192nd, 193rd, 194th, and 195th. Some airmen were transferred out of our formation, while others were assigned to take their places. There the new Commandant, Captain Pilot Giuseppe Noziglia, was assigned to our squadron.

It was at that time that the radiotelegrapher Pierin[14] Panzeri was assigned to our 192nd Squadron to another airplane. He became my friend right away. We had lots of fun together in our free time from duties and during the weekends on leave in town. Our friendship grew over the years that we served in the same squadron.

Pierin was born in England, where his father worked as a valet in a hotel. His family returned to Italy when he was very young and they settled in his parent's native hamlet Sottoripa di Pondida, located near the town of Bergamo in northwestern Italy.

From what Pierin told me about his life I understood that they maintained many customs, which they had gotten used to while living in England. It was especially funny for me that they had a habit of drinking tea, which at that time wasn't the custom of Italian common folks.

For some reason Pierin felt that his parents didn't love him. On those occasions when he drank a little bit more wine than usual, he would start to cry and to complain that he was born unfortunate and unwanted by his parents and that they never loved him. But when he was not under the influence of alcohol he never mentioned anything specific about his treatment by his parents that would support this idea.

Pierin was a good-natured and simple young man. He had less education than I and was not as fond of books as I was. He told me that as he was growing up, he read very few books, except those required in school. Now, he occasionally read some magazines. He liked to play cards and billiards and on these pastimes we got along with each other very well.

At the airport of Forli we received flight training on the new Savoia S.81 heavy bombers that were appreciated for their capacity to carry a heavy ammunition load, for autonomy in navigation, and for ease of handling the airplane. They were also equipped with the new radio-goniometer[15] that was a radio-wave beam direction-finder; the instrument could locate a flying airplane and its flight direction. Therefore, all radiotelegraphers had to learn how to operate this new equipment.

In order not to disrupt the service of the squadrons, one radiotelegrapher at a time was sent for a week to Milan[16] to the training center at the military airport of Malpensa. It was a big place with servicemen from all over Italy coming and going every day like on a large railroad station. From my previous experience of such transit places I knew that shoes and clothing could be stolen very easily; therefore, I brought with me only what I could wear on my body. To be sure that it wouldn't disappear during the night when I was asleep, I would put on the head side one leg of my bunk bed in each shoe and put my well-folded pants and jacket under my pillow. Well, this trick also worked this time.

When I returned to the Base at the Airport of Forli, I found out that Bum-Bum had found himself a new occupation; he was taking care of the little pet monkey that belonged to the commandant of his squadron. Later, as usual, he got himself into more

trouble. One day he went on leave in the town of Forli and brought back a bicycle, which he immediately repainted another color. After a few days he went back to town and stopped at the same bar where he had stolen the bicycle from some customer who was drunk. This time the owner of the bicycle was quite sober and was waiting for the thief to show up. He recognized the bicycle and went to complain to the commandant. This time Bum-Bum went too far and was put in prison. We never saw him again.

Speaking about the bicycle reminds me that while at the huge airport of Forli I saved enough money from my military pay, after mailing the rest to my family, to buy my first bicycle, which allowed me to move from our living quarters to the hangars and to the mess hall much faster, especially during the hot summer months.

On July 16, 1936 I completed 81 hours and 50 minutes of in-flight training and was reassigned to the 193rd Squadron. We were stationed at the Airport of Forli until the end of October 1937. At the end of July 1937 the commandant of our squadron, Captain Pilot Giuseppe Noziglia, was transferred and in his place Captain G. De Cecco was appointed.

On the Savoia S.81 bombers we were able to stay much longer in the air and could fly at much higher altitudes, from 1000 meters up to 5,600 meters. We also had very good pilots who were flying our airplanes. It was a pleasure to fly with them because they knew how to handle the planes during takeoffs, landings, and in the air. From the records in my Personal Book of Flight I was able to recall all their names, some of which had vanished from my memory with the passing of time: Cornell Pilot Bonomi, Lieutenant Cornell Pilot Bonini, Lieutenant Pilots Terracciano and Zannier, and Major Pilot Palessa; also Captain Pilots: De Cecco, Noziglia, Simoni, Maramaldo; and Second Lieutenant Pilots: Rotolo, Pini, Franzini, Patterniani, and Vecchi.

We had all kinds of military exercises: recognizance flights over land and sea; patrols of one squadron, or of two or three planes; missions with the whole formation; bombardment simulations on the target field with bombs made out of cement; and machine gun exercises in the marshes of Puglia, where we would fly at a very low altitude and scare the buffalos, who would run as fast as they could when they heard the sounds of our motors and machine gun rounds.

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1. A suburb of the city of Naples in west-central Italy.
2. The lower ranks in the Italian Air Force were: *Aviere* - Airman, *Aviere Scelto* - Select Airman, *Primo Aviere* - First Airman.
3. *Libretto Personale di Volo, Ministero dell'Aeronautica, Napoli*, June 5, 1935.
4. From the photo of the graduating class of the Air Force School for Specialists in Capodichino.
5. Seaplane base on the Adriatic Sea in northeastern Italy in the region of Istria.
6. "Antonio the Wrecker."
7. A town in the southeastern Italy in the region of Puglia.
8. An island in the Mediterranean Sea in southern Italy.
9. An island in the Mediterranean Sea, under the British rule.
10. The war with Ethiopia started on October 3, 1935. The Italian troops entered Addis Ababa, the capital of Ethiopia on May 5, 1936.
11. First Minister of Italy and *Il Duce*, the leader of the Italian Fascist party.
12. In central Italy, region of Emilia, south of the town of Ferrara.
13. Town in central Italy, region of Emilia.
14. Diminutive of Piero.
15. An instrument for measuring angles, especially of solid bodies.
16. City in northern Italy in the region of Lombardia.

Chapter 6

Volunteer In the Legionary Air Force

As Remembered by Giulio Verro
Translated and Edited by Olga Gladky Verro

During the period when I was in training at the Airport Base of Forli, the civil war had been going on for some time in another European country of Spain. First, the Spanish communists got rid of the king and established the Republic. Their government had strong opposition from the noncommunist-minded citizens. General Franco[1] began fighting the Republic government from the territory of Spanish Morocco,[2] where there was a military revolt against the government of Madrid. Franco used mercenary troops of the Foreign Legion, who were all volunteers, and as he was conquering Spanish territory he was drafting young Spanish men to serve in his army.

Right from the beginning Italian *Duce* Benito Mussolini had supported General Franco, who wanted to establish a fascist regime in Spain. And German Fuhrer Adolf Hitler[3] was also sympathetic to the cause of General Franco. But according to international agreements they could not officially interfere with the civil war in another country and send their regular troops to Spain. They found a way to help Franco by sending servicemen from their armed forces as “volunteers” in the Foreign Legion. It was not a secret that this was going on, but the international community, which was not too happy with the communist takeover in Spain, was allowing the masquerade to go on.

Only the Soviet Union, France, and Czechoslovakia openly supported the communist government in Spain. Through the ports of France, which had a very permissive policy, these countries were helping the Republican communist government with volunteers, arms, and military supplies. The International Brigades formed from idealistic volunteers and adventurers from France and other countries joined the Republican side to fight. Garibaldi’s battalion within the International Brigade included Italian antifascists in exile.

At the military airport of Forli it was known that several squadrons of the Italian Air Force had already served and returned from Spain. Among the first squadrons who volunteered were the famous squadrons called *Sorci Verdi*[4] and “The Dragoons of Death.” Their fame was used for propaganda purposes as an example to be followed by the other squadrons. Therefore, we were not surprised when in the first week of November 1937 our formation was called for an assembly in a hangar and we were presented with the choice of going to Spain as volunteers. We were offered higher pay, an experience in real warfare, and an opportunity to earn extra hours of flight in combat.

The commander of our squadron, Captain de Cecco, was the first to volunteer and was followed by almost all airmen from our squadron, with the exception of a few who were substituted with volunteers from the other squadrons.

Pierin Panzeri and I didn’t think too long about it; politically we were unsophisticated, and we volunteered too. Young as we were, an adventure appealed to

us and, after the monotony of the established routine at the base, we were ready to finally get into real action. An additional incentive was the chance to see new places and have fun with extra money in our pockets.

Another squadron from our formation followed our example, which completed a group of two squadrons ready to go to Spain.

Before departure most of our airmen were promoted. As a specialist radiotelegrapher I was promoted to the rank of *Aviere Scelto*,[5] as it is listed in our Airplane Number 4 "Book of Station,"[6] which remained in my possession.

As radiotelegrapher one of my duties was to keep a record of all Airplane Number 4 missions. From the entries I was able to reconstruct the exact dates, times and targets of our squadron's military missions for that period and I found many details of our flights during our campaign in Spain. For easy reference, I kept the names of towns, islands, and other geographical names in Spanish as they were recorded at that time. I found additional information from the records of my military service in the "Excerpts of Peacetime Flights"[7] and in the "Excerpts of Wartime Flights"[8] that were verified and signed by the commandant of our squadron, Captain Pilot G. De Cecco.

In the "Book of Station" my entries started in Forli on February 24, 1937. On the very top of the page dated November 12, 1937, which was the day of our departure for Spain, I wrote in Spanish *Todo per la Patria*[9] and underlined it, as if I intended it to serve as a title for the entries that would follow. All entries at that time were written in a code that was changed often and I couldn't decipher now. However, starting on the day of our departure from the Military Airport of Forli, parts of the records were written in plain Italian.

The commander of our group of two squadrons was Cornell Drago. The takeoff from the Airport of Forli was sharp at 10:00 in the morning. The commandant of our squadron, Captain Pilot G. De Cecco, was piloting our Savoia S.81 heavy bomber; Lieutenant Pilot Terracciano was the Second Pilot. In one hour and twenty minutes we landed at the Airport of Montecelio in Rome.

In one week our group had undergone a complete metamorphosis from being airmen in the Italian Air Force to being civilians and volunteers in the Foreign Legion. Our squadron changed its name and number from the 192nd Squadron of Terrestrial Bombardment of the Italian Air Force to 251st Squadron of Terrestrial Nocturnal Bombardment in the Legionary Air Force.

Our airplanes also changed their insignia. The insignia of the Italian Air Force, the national tricolor green-white-and-red stripes, on the rudder of the tail were removed and in its place the insignia of the Legionary Air Force, the black cross of Saint Andrew, was painted.

For the duration of the travel from Italy to Spain all airmen had to wear civilian clothing and they all had received civilian passports with fictitious last names, while the first names remained the same. I was given a passport in the name of Giulio Villani.

At 10:50 on the morning of November 20, 1937 our group of two squadrons, the 251st and 252nd, of four planes each, took off from Monticello Airport. On route we had only coded communications with the ground bases and with the airplane of the commandant of our group Lieutenant Pilot Terracciano. He ordered our Pilot Captain de Cecco to fly over the clouds at the altitude of 2,500 meters.

At 12:36 in the afternoon we landed on the Island of Sardinia[10] at the large

Military Airport of Elmas, where we stayed overnight and refueled our airplanes. The next morning on November 21 at 10:30 our group took off from the Airport of Elmas in a westerly direction toward the Balearic Islands.[11] Our final destination was the Spanish military airport on the Island of Mallorca[12] that was already under control of the National Army of General Franco. On route we had only coded communications and were flying at an altitude of 4,500 meters. That afternoon, after three hours and forty minutes of flight, we landed at the military airport of San Bonnet on the Island of Mallorca.

The military airport of San Bonnet was located on the outskirts of the small hamlet San Bonnet, about a half-hour bus-ride from the town of Palma de Mallorca. The living quarters for the legionnaires of our XXV Group B.N.[13] were in the school next to the airport. All accommodations were already there as they had been left by another group of Italian legionnaires who had recently returned home.

As soon as we arrived, we were given khaki uniforms with an emblem of Legionary Air Force wings. We were all given new documents in exchange for our Italian passports. I was issued a military ID Card Number 7985, for the United Legionary Air Force in the name of Giulio Villani, *Cabo Radiotelegrafista.*[14] It was stamped with an official seal of the General Command of the Balearic General Staff[15] and authorized the bearer free movement in the territory occupied by the National Army and an authorization to bear arms.

Our two squadrons, the 251st and 252nd, belonged to the XXV Group of Heavy Bombardment named "*Pipistrelli*"[16] and its command headquarters were stationed on the continental part of Spain that was already occupied by the National Army.

To distinguish our two squadrons from the rest of the group we were called "*Pipistrelli delle Baleari.*"[1] We had assignments of flying the nocturnal bombardments, or B.N. missions, on those nights when there was enough moonlight to provide us with visibility of the targets on the ground, while providing us with the safety of the darkness in the sky. Our Savoia S.81 three-engine heavy bombers were too slow for a daytime bombardment when we could have been an easy target for the enemy fighter airplanes in the sky and the antiaircraft guns from the ground.

The other Italian Air Force squadrons who were also camouflaged as a Legionary Air Force did the daytime bombardment missions. They had Savoia S.79 bombers, which at that time were considered to be the best in Europe for speed and maneuverability for the daytime bombardments.

Also on the Island of Mallorca at the Airport of Son San Juan another Italian squadron of CR.32 *Caccia Rosarelli* fighter airplanes was stationed and in the harbor of Palma de Mallorca was the base of one Italian submarine; both masqueraded as legionary units of the National Armed Forces. The command headquarters of these units were located in the city of Palma de Mallorca and all officers lived there in hotels.

On November 25, 1937, after only four days since our arrival here, we made a two -and-a-half hour reconnaissance flight over the coast of Ibiza, the Island of Formetera, Cape San Antonio, and the Island of Columbrettes at an altitude of 2,500 meters. Major Pilot Fiore was in command of our plane. Thereafter we had a two-week span of no flights, as recorded in the "Book of Station." During that period we settled in our living quarters and completed maintenance on our airplanes and equipment, getting everything ready for the air bombardments.

On December 7, 1937 the Reds bombarded the city of Palma de Mallorca.[17] Most

bombs fell on the residential area of the city, damaging houses. Their targets probably were the general staff headquarters of the Balearic and the command headquarters of the Legionary Air Force, both located in the city. When Pierin and I visited the city after the bombardment, we saw some of the buildings destroyed by the bombs. As a souvenir I asked our Air Force photographer to give me several photographs made by him immediately after the air raid. For us it was the first glimpse of the destructive power of bombs.

On December 8, 1937 we were ordered to get ready for our first bombardment. It was a daytime mission. Our target was the Airfield of Mahon on the island of Minorca. We had on board ten 100-kilogram bombs. Lieutenant Pilot Terracciano was in command of the patrol. The takeoff was at 11:40[18] in the morning. Weather was good with 5/10 cloudiness. On board everything was well. At 12:31 we reached our target and dropped the bombs. Our airplane was hit with three splinters of antiaircraft shells, which made holes toward the tail. This was the only daytime bombardment that we made during the Spanish campaign. We learned right away that the other side, the Republicans, or as they were more commonly called the Reds, had and knew how to use the antiaircraft guns.

The next few days we stayed on the ground, repaired the holes in our airplane, completed routine maintenance on our radio equipment, and changed batteries. Pierin and I took a bus to Palma de Mallorca. The weather was good and we explored the town, visited some sites of recent bombardment, and found the movie theater and a coffee house where we could play billiards.

On the morning of December 11, 1937 we made a short fifteen-minute flight from the airport of San Bonnet to the Airport of Son San Juan and back. Then the same evening we were ordered to get ready for the second bombardment under the command of Captain Pilot de Cecco. This time our target was Barcelona. We had on board ten 100 -kilogram bombs. The takeoff was at 17:30. Weather was good. At 18:10 all was well on board. We were flying at an altitude of 4,000 meters and dropped the bombs from that height. It was a long two-and-a-half-hour nocturnal flight over territory unknown to us. We safely landed at 19:50.

The next day, on December 12, we made two routine flights from the Airport of San Bonnet to the Airport of Son San Juan and back. The rest of the week that followed we stayed on the ground. Probably the nocturnal visibility on the ground was not sufficient either from the moonlight, or from excessive cloudiness, and was not favorable for flying nocturnal bombardment missions.

We had plenty of time to rest and get to know the city of Palma de Mallorca and its places of entertainment. This time we stayed there until late at night. We went to a *cafe tabarain* called Il Trocadero, a place that was recommended to us by the other legionaries, where wine was good and there was light entertainment with music and dance. One could also find there young women who kept company with legionaries and showered the lonely young men with attention. When Pierin and I walked in, a young woman by the name of Pachita sat at our table, chatted with us, and we treated her with wine. That week we also went to the movies where legionaries were admitted free of charge and could sit in the first rows of the theater.

On December 19, 1937 we received an order to get ready for our third bombardment. Our target was again Barcelona. We had on board ten bombs of 100

kilograms each. The patrol was under the command of Lieutenant Pilot Terracciano. Takeoff was at 19:53. We flew at an altitude of 4,000 meters. At 21:15 we reached the target and dropped bombs on Barcelona. There was a grand fire on the coast. I counted seven searchlights that were hunting us. Numerous antiaircraft guns were aiming at us, but their shots were completely off target. However, the fiery trajectories were spectacular. We returned to the base without any incidents and landed safely.

On December 22, 1937 it was my twenty-second birthday. We were ordered to get ready to fly that night. It was our fourth bombardment. This time the target was Valencia. We were carrying twenty bombs of 50 kilograms each. The commandant of the patrol was again Lieutenant Pilot Terracciano. Takeoff was at 23:30. On board everything was regular. At 00:20 we were flying at an altitude of 3,450 meters. I reported again that all was fine on board. However, one could not see anything under us but an enormous screen of clouds. Valencia was covered with clouds but there was one small window of clearance. At 00:55 we reached the target and dropped the bombs. I counted ten searchlights that were persistently searching under the clouds. There were numerous antiaircraft artillery; their shots exploded illuminating, or rather reddening, the clouds underneath us. Their effect was magnificent, but my “funk meter” measuring a degree of fear was marking high on the scale of 100. I had the impression of seeing a monoplane just above the clouds and we ran immediately toward the machine guns, but we didn’t have to use them. At 01:35 we were navigating by radio beacon. So far everything was well. We landed at 02:20. It was a night that would not be forgotten because our Airplane Number 2 got lost over the sea. It found the island after six hours in flight.

The next five days we again stayed on the ground because of bad weather. We celebrated Christmas at Il Trocadero together with some members of our crew. There were Bombardier Sergeant-Major Armita, First Flight Engineer Sergeant-Major Campello, Second Flight Engineer Sergeant-Major Trevisano, Gunner First Airman Guidi, and radiotelegraphers Select Airman Pierin Panzeri and I, Select Airman Giulio Verro. And there were many other members of our group from Pierin’s airplane crew, whose names I don’t recall now. We drank plenty of Spanish wine, enjoyed music, dancing, and the company of women. The same young woman, Pachita, began to show too much interest in me, almost courting me, but I didn’t care much about her.

The same week we were advised not to visit Il Trocadero again. It was brought to the attention of our officers that many of the patrons of Il Trocadero were either suspected communists or their sympathizers, or maybe their spies. Our superiors worried about our personal safety, but the possibility of revealing information about the targets of our missions was also an important concern; divulging that information would endanger the whole patrol during the bombardment missions.

Only on December 28 we had a two-hour daytime visual reconnaissance flight with Major Pilot Fiore over the Cape of Saint Antonio on the Spanish coast. We were flying at an altitude of 3,450 meters. With the overcast sky and some drizzle we traveled between one cloud and another. For the next few days the cloudy weather continued and we stayed on the ground.

On December 30, 1937 we had an aborted mission. It was an attempted bombardment. Our target was Barcelona. We had on board fourteen bombs of 50 kilograms each. The takeoff was at 04:00. After fifteen minutes of flight we had to

return to the base because of the adverse atmospheric conditions of haze and cloudiness. We landed at 04:30 with all the cargo of bombs on board. It was dangerous landing and, although we trusted our pilot, Lieutenant Terracciano, we were holding our breath until the last second when we stopped.

The bad weather allowed us again to celebrate the New Year. I had discovered on Dei Sindacati Street a very small pastry shop where one could buy pastries and a glass of Malaga or Sherry wine and have refreshment in the shop. In addition to these delights of the palate, I found another attraction, a young and gentle salesgirl by the name Margarita. She was about my age, slim and tall, with black hair and dark eyes. I got a big crush on her and began to patronize the pastry shop on every occasion I could get into town.

Only on January 7, 1938 the weather allowed us to fly again. It was our fifth bombardment. Our target was the railway and road junction of Estivello at the Mount of Sagunto. We were carrying ten bombs of 100 kilograms each. The commander of the patrol was Major Pilot Fiore. Takeoff was at 16:30. Everything was regular on board; weather was good. In the "Book of Station" I wrote: "It is a magnificent evening. I am admiring the sunset from 3,000 meters over the sea. Far away the sky is purple-red. We have the enemy coast in sight. At 18:05 we reached our objective. There is complete calm on the target. The antiaircraft guns of first line of defense began shooting at us at the coast. Some were excellent shots. I saw also shots from a machine gun that resembled flying red chestnuts. There were only three searchlights. We dropped the bombs from an altitude of 1000 meters. Mission accomplished. We are returning to the base. We landed at 20:30."

We had only two days for maintenance on our airplane and equipment and two nights to rest. On January 11, 1938 we were ordered to get ready for the sixth bombardment. Our mission was bombardment and machine gun fire at a low altitude on a span of the road Teruel to Sagunto. On board we had fifty-six bombs of 15 kilograms each. The commander of the mission was Major Pilot Fiore. Takeoff was at 17:15. It was hazy at the horizon, illuminated by the last rays of sunset. We followed the same route as on the previous mission to Sagunto. At 18:55 we dropped the bombs. There was a long column of military trucks, which we showered with two hundred rounds of machine gun fire. We hit the mark very well from an altitude of 700 meters. Very strange, there was not even one searchlight. It was a long flight of three hours. We landed at 20:15.

On January 12, 1938 we flew a reconnaissance by sight in the morning at the coast of Ibiza with Second Lieutenant Pilot Pini and in the afternoon made a short flight from San Bonnet to Son San Juan with Lieutenant Pilot Terracciano.

On January 13, 1938 we were ordered to get ready to fly the seventh bombardment mission. Our targets were two bridges leading from Almasora toward Segunto. On board we had four bombs of 250 kilograms each. The commander of our patrol was Second Lieutenant Pilot Rotolo. Takeoff was at 19:30. On the island the weather was mediocre. At 19:45 we had lost sight of the head of the patrol while navigating in a dense bank of clouds at an altitude of 1,100 meters. At 19:55 the head of the patrol was still not visible and we feared that he might have returned to the base, but we haven't received any notice or orders from the base. We continued on our route. The sky was now clear and visibility near the target was very good. At 21:00 we dropped the

bombs. From the ground there was no resistance, not even one shot from antiaircraft guns. As we were returning to the base the cloudiness increased. At 22:10 we were over the island, but the airfield was not visible because of very low clouds. At 22:15 the airfield had become illuminated and we landed.

On January 15th we flew from San Bonnet to Son San Juan and the next day to Salines with Lieutenant Pilot Terracciano. For the next five days we were on the ground servicing our planes and equipment. I had time to make several visits to the pastry shop. Between one customer and another I could exchange a few words with Margarita. She told me that both of her brothers were drafted, one by the Republican Army, or the Reds as they were called, and another by the National Army of General Franco. She was worrying about them, especially about the one who was with the Reds because the family hadn't had any news from him for a long time.

On January 21, 1938 we received orders to get ready for the eighth bombardment mission. The target was the line of communication and the road from Valencia to Cullena.[19] On board were twenty bombs of 50 kilograms each. We had seven persons aboard; among them were Cornell Martire from the headquarters and our group commander, Lieutenant Cornell Drago. Takeoff was at 03:00. It was a long flight to the target at an altitude of 3,600 meters. We attacked the city at 05:05. There were no searchlights or antiaircraft shelling. We found complete calm on the ground. Far away I could see a huge fire maybe caused by the previous daytime bombardment.

The next day, on January 22, 1938, we were ordered to fly again. It was our ninth bombardment mission. The target was the Port of Valencia. We had on board twenty bombs of 50 kilograms each. Our pilot was Lieutenant Terracciano. Takeoff was at 03:25. We reached the target at 04:10. This time we had an excellent reception. The alarm was given before we reached the city. There were eight searchlights and numerous antiaircraft guns. Nevertheless, willing or unwilling, we had to drop the bombs over the searchlights and get out in a hurry. At 04:20 we were on our way to the base. Everything went all right. The searchlights touched us in crossing the sky without noticing our plane and did not provide the antiaircraft guns with the target. The big fire that I had noticed the night before was still burning in full force. It was again a very long flight. We returned to the base as the dawn was breaking, revealing magnificent Aurora over the sea.

We had the next twelve nights without flying bombardment missions. Probably it was a period without moonlight. However, we made several daytime flights with Lieutenant Pilot Terracciano from San Bonnet to Son San Juan and to Salinas. We serviced our planes and equipment and I had plenty of time during the day to visit Margarita in the bakery shop. If my father could only see all those pastries that I was eating there, he would probably say that I completely forgot his preaching that eating sweets would ruin my teeth. Of course, at that time I was not thinking about that. I was content to have a few minutes of Margarita's attention between one customer and another. My courtship during that time was limited to seeing her in the shop and getting to know her better.

Meanwhile, Pierin and I had time in the evenings to play a few games of billiards in the small local coffee shop, to play cards in the lounge of our living quarters, or go to the movies. During the day we were also practicing with the soccer team and had competitions with the legionaries stationed at the Airport of Son San Juan. I also had

time to write letters home and to read somewhat outdated Italian newspapers and magazines, which were arriving on the ships bringing the mail from Italy and replacement volunteers for those who were returning home. We also had time to improve our Spanish, which allowed us to communicate with the locals quite well with the help of some Italian words.

On February 8, 1938 we were notified to get ready for our tenth bombardment mission. The target was an industrial complex of high furnaces in Sagunto. We had on board ten mine bombs of 100 kilograms each. The pilot was Lieutenant Terracciano. Takeoff was at 17:20. The weather on the island was good, but there were massive white clouds on the horizon. Sunset was almost over. We were flying at an altitude of 3,000 meters toward the left of Valencia. The alarm in the city had been given well in advance of our arrival and stirred up very strong antiaircraft reaction. In my judgment, this was the strongest reaction that we had seen so far. The shots were efficient at various altitudes. Ten potent searchlights were completing the spectacle. Therefore, we turned away from the city to find another way to approach the target. We reached the target at 18:50. On the ground there were three searchlights, one machine gun, and three antiaircraft guns. We dropped the bombs and at 19:15 were on our way back to the base, but we lost contact with the leader of our air patrol and were flying by radio beam. Aboard, everything was regular. We landed at 20:20.

On February 10, 1938 at 6:25 in the morning we flew out to the sea on a visual reconnaissance mission to police enemy shores in the sector of Dragonera, Valencia, and Barcelona. The pilot was Lieutenant Terracciano. The sky was covered with clouds and it was drizzling. We were flying at an altitude of 2,500 meters. At 7:21 the sky cleared up and we could see the Island of Corubrette far away. We returned and landed at 10:30.

After our last mission there were no entries in “The Book of Station” for twenty-four days. I don’t recall the reason for it; maybe it was only our airplane grounded, or maybe it was due to bad weather and moonless nights. The warm spring weather allowed us to form soccer teams and we had plenty of time to practice on the green field of San Bonnet. Also this was probably the period when I had time to take Margarita to the movies and have some short walks with her. I was in love, but our relationship did not go beyond a few kisses and we exchanged photographs.

On March 2, 1938 we flew another visual reconnaissance mission over the sector of Dragonera, Valencia, and Barcelona, and on March 3 off the shores of Castellon de la Plana. On both missions the pilot was Lieutenant Terracciano.

On March 6, 1938 our mission was an intervention in the skies over the National Fleet during a naval battle. In “The Book of Station” I wrote: “Last night the Spanish ship ‘Baleares’ was sunk. We are departing at about 7:00 in the morning to search for the enemy fleet. We have only three airplanes each carrying five 100 kilograms bombs. On my airplane we have Commandant of our Group Cornell Drago and Cornell of the Spanish National Air Force. At takeoff the weather was very good. At 9:20 we discern in the distance a group of five warships. One in the center is probably the ship ‘Canarias’ and the others placed around in a circle should be the English inspection ships. There is also a large oil spot visible on the water’s surface. At 9:30 we were flying at an altitude of 2,500 meters. The ships made a warning sign with one minute of antiaircraft fire in our direction. We have to turn toward the open sea. There is no sign of the Red Fleet.

The large mass of clouds under us interfered with visibility for a while. Then it cleared up and we were able to observe the Red coast. It was very possible that the Red ships found refuge at the port of Cartagena and we could not find them. We landed at the base at 10:30 with the load of bombs on board."

On March 11, 1938 we flew a reconnaissance mission with Lieutenant Pilot Terracciano to the Islands of Columbrette and Alcocebre. Visibility was mediocre from an altitude of 4,300 meters.

After three days, the nocturnal visibility improved and we were ordered on March 15, 1938 to fly the eleventh bombardment mission. The target was a coastal road, Vinaroz to Torreblanca, in the direction of Saint Carlos. We were carrying twenty bombs of 50 kilograms each. On board we had the Commandant of our Group Lieutenant Cornell Drago. Two air patrols departed before us carrying bombs of 250 kilograms each for the famous bridges of Sagunto. At 20:15 we took off toward our target. It was a magnificent evening with a full moon. At 21:20 we reached the target. There was complete calm on the ground and no anti-aircraft reaction. We accomplished our mission from an altitude of 1,000 meters without any interference from the ground. At 21:30 we were on our way to the base. We landed at 22:15.

The next night, on March 16, 1938, we were ordered to fly again. It was our twelfth bombardment. Lieutenant Cornell Drago was on our plane. Each airplane in our patrol was carrying four bombs of 250 kilograms each and propaganda leaflets[20] for the population. All this cargo had to be dropped on Barcelona. I wrote in "The Book of Station": "It will be the night of hell for this city. We have three patrols that should alternate in the attack on the city. All together about thirty-six bombs of 250 kilograms each will be dropped that should hit the target."

We took off at 22:00. The weather was excellent. We were flying at an altitude of 4,100 meters. At 23:20 we were over our target. The air raid warning was given a long time before our arrival. We attacked from hinterland to be in the right direction for the return to the base after dropping the bombs. There was a terrible reaction from the antiaircraft artillery. The shells were exploding on all altitudes. There were thirteen very potent searchlights scouting the sky. Our bombs produced enormous blazes. At 23:30 we were on our way to our base without any damages to our planes.

On March 17, 1938 we were ordered to get ready to fly again. It was our thirteenth bombardment. Lieutenant Terracciano was piloting our plane. We had four bombs aboard of 250 kilograms each. Our target was again Barcelona. In "The Book of Station" I wrote my thoughts: "For sure, in this city there is a reign of terror. All day today the S.79ts flew there to drop bombs. Now there are two patrols of S.81ts in flight and we are the third patrol waiting to take off at 02:45. The weather is good and everything aboard is regular. We are flying at an altitude of 4,000 meters. At 04:00 we are over Barcelona. They were not tired yet of shooting at us from the ground. I counted the same thirteen searchlights and saw the same enormous blazes from our bombs. Poor city! It was only a short while ago that we landed and there are three S.79ts with their motors on, ready to start their turn."

March 18, 1938. We were flying again! It was our fourteenth bombardment. This time we were going in pursuit of the Red Troops' Command, which seems to be hiding at Tortosa. We had aboard four bombs of 250 kilograms each and leaflets. Lieutenant Terracciano was piloting our plane. We took off at 01:45. Weather was good. It was a

long flight and at 02:30 I wrote in “The Book of Station” my thoughts: “It is curious to observe how one passes the time on board before reaching the target. One of my friends is solving crossword puzzles; the other one is absorbed in reading an Italian political journal. Once in a while we sip cognac to fight the cold, which is very intense at the altitude of 4,000 meters. Each of us is doing whatever that he can find to do! At 03:20 we reached our target and dropped the bombs. On the ground is a lot of haziness and visibility is poor. We made a perfect hit on the target. Two bombs ended up exactly on the Provincial Road. There was a complete absence of antiaircraft reaction. At 04:13 we landed on our base.”

Almost three weeks from the last mission we were on the ground without flying. I think that this was the time when our command received a warning that the Reds were planning to bomb our airfield. The Soviet “volunteer” Air Force had already bombarded the Airport of Son San Juan before our group’s arrival here. At that time, because of the advance warning, all fighter planes were removed from the airport ahead of time and saved. This time all our planes were moved to another small airport on the Island of Mallorca, and all airmen to the hotel on the beach of Manacor, where we waited until the threat of the expected bombardment was over. It was a false alarm, but our command didn’t want to take chances of losing airplanes and ser¬vicemen. It was a good time to relax after our previous intensive bombardment missions and we all needed a change of pace.

On our return to the base we serviced our planes and equipment and had plenty of time to rest. I was glad to have an opportunity to visit Margarita more often in the pastry shop, but each time I found several suitors there, all Italian legionaries, competing with each other for her attention. As a salesgirl she had to smile at all customers; after all, the owners were interested in selling their baked goodies, but for the young men the pastries were not the only attraction that made them come to their shop. Of course, I saw this as being threatening to what I thought by this time was an established sentimental feeling between Margarita and me. I was returning to the base bothered by these apparently innocent occurrences that were putting me in a very jealous mood.

One afternoon I returned from the pastry shop to the base really upset with those whom I considered to be my rivals for Margarita’s attention. I anticipated that sharing my problems with my friend Pierin would help me to get over my disappointment. Instead, I found him all excited and in a very good mood and I had to listen to his ideas about his girl. He had just received a letter with a photograph of his young *madrina*, as we called a soldier’s godmother, a kind of a pen pal who adopted him when we left for Spain. From the first letters that he received from her he became more and more interested in meeting her in person when he returned to Italy.

I also had a *madrina* who was writing to me, but I didn’t have any particular interest in her. I was taken by the charm of Margarita and had no intention of giving her up. I continued to show up in the pastry shop each day when I could be free until it became obvious for some of the new suitors that Margarita favored me. But Margarita didn’t like my being jealous and she told me that. In the following weeks our squadron resumed a very intensive schedule of bombardments and during that time I could not get to Palma di Mallorca to see Margarita.

On April 6, 1938 we made a daytime visual reconnaissance mission over the

coast of Barcelona with Lieutenant Terracciano piloting the plane. On April 7, in the morning we flew to the Airport of Son San Juan and the same night we resumed nocturnal bombardment missions. It was our fifteenth bombardment. The target this time was a railroad station south of Tortosa and the railroad tracks between Ulldecona and Saint Barbara. We were carrying twenty bombs of 50 kilograms each. Takeoff was at 19:30. Cornell Drago was aboard our plane. It was still clear daylight. The weather was good with some haziness over the sea. We were flying at an altitude of 2,000 meters. At 20:40 we reached our target. It was a bombardment of average success as some bombs fell on the adjacent road. At 20:50 we were on our way to the base and we landed at 21:52.

The next morning, on April 8, 1938 at 08:45 we were in the air on a short visual reconnaissance mission over the Red coast of Cape Tortosa. Lieutenant Pilot Terracciano kept an altitude of 4,200 meters. The same evening of April 8, we were ordered for a nocturnal bombardment. It was our sixteenth bombardment. Again the target was south of Tortosa, the road and the railroad between Saint Barbara and Ulldecona. Again we were carrying twenty bombs of 50 kilograms each. Lieutenant Cornel Drago piloted the plane. Takeoff was at 19:30. The weather was good with some haziness over the sea. At 20:40 we reached the target and from an altitude of 1,400 meters dropped the bombs. On this night the action was brilliant. We had a hit right in the middle of the road and of the railroad tracks that were parallel. However, the last bombs fell on a small village. There was very scarce and inefficient reaction from the antiaircraft guns. At 21:20 we were already flying back to the base. In “The Book of Station” I wrote: “It is a magnificent night and it is very impressive to see the reflection of this patrol of three aircraft in a wedge-shaped formation moving forward over a vast, liquid, and sometimes treacherous sea. But tonight the sea is calm, the full moon is illuminating our wings, and the mirrored image of our planes seems to be almost showing our way over calm distension of the water.” At 22:00 we landed at the base.

The full moon nights had to be used as much as possible. And on April 9, 1938 we were ordered again to get ready to fly that night. It was our seventeenth bombardment. Once more our targets were the road and railroad south of Tortosa. Again we had the same load of twenty bombs of 50 kilograms each. Takeoff was at 19:30. We reached the target at 21:00 and from 1,000 meters of altitude started to drop the bombs. I had never assisted at such an exciting bombardment. Not one bomb was wasted. The road and the railroad tracks were hit for a length of two kilometers. In addition, two bombs ended on the railroad station and their explosion started a fire. It was still burning when we left the shores and were on our way toward the Island of Mallorca. We landed at 21:50.

We had three days of maintenance to our aircraft and equipment. Then on April 13, 1938 we were flying again. It was our eighteenth bombardment. The targets were the road and railroad tracks from Vinaroz toward Peniscola. We had the usual twenty bombs of 50 kilograms each. Lieutenant Cornel Drago was piloting our plane. Takeoff was at 21:00. Weather was mediocre, with lots of haziness and dense layers of clouds at 2,000 meters of altitude. This time we made two passes over the target at 1,200 meters of altitude, one at 22:15 and another one at 22:30. Aiming was mediocre; one bomb hit the Pier of Vinaroz. All planes landed at our base at 22:50.

On April 14, 1938 during the daytime we flew with Lieutenant Terracciano from

San Bonet to Son San Juan and back and at night we were ordered for another nocturnal bombardment mission. It was our nineteenth bombardment. As on the previous night the target was at Vinaroz, the road to Saint Barbara. We had the same number and size of bombs. The pilot was Lieutenant Terracciano. The takeoff was at 21:30. The weather was stupendous and the moon was also magnificent. At 22:40 we dropped the bombs from an altitude of 1,800 meters, but with poor results. Disappointed, we headed back to the base where we safely landed at 23:50.

These full moon nights couldn't be wasted. And on April 15, 1938 we were flying again. It was our twentieth bombardment. The targets were south of Vinaroz, a road and railroad tracks to Hospitalet Perello. We had the same number of bombs of 50 kilograms each. This time we flew a patrol of four airplanes. Once more, the pilot was Lieutenant Terracciano. Takeoff was at 23:30. The weather was very good. At 00:30 we reached the targets, which were completely covered with dense layers of clouds. We were flying just above them at 900 meters of altitude and our wheels were brushing against this fluffy mass. Aiming at the target was inexact. However, some bombs did fell on the road. We could hear very well from the airplane the dry sounds of our exploding bombs. There was no antiaircraft reaction from the ground. We could not observe the results on the ground and headed toward our base. We landed at 01:40.

Our airplane was allowed to rest from nocturnal flying for four days. We serviced the plane and equipment and had time to go to the movies. I made a short visit to see Margarita in the pastry shop. On April 19, 1938 we flew a daytime visual reconnaissance flight over Cape Tortosa at an altitude of 4,300 meters. Our pilot again was Lieutenant Terracciano.

On April 20, 1938 we had an attempted twenty-first bombardment. The targets were the roads and railroad tracks toward Tarragona. We had the same twenty bombs of 50 kilograms each. It was a Patrol of four planes. Our pilot again was Lieutenant Terracciano. The takeoff was at 01:45. Weather on the island was good. At 03:00 we were navigating at a high altitude of 3,700 meters over very dense layers of clouds. It was very cold. The clouds hindered our search for the targets. Once in a while we could see some small patches of land under us. We heard that the other airplanes in our patrol took advantage of those windows in the clouds to drop the bombs. We were navigating with all taillights on, so we would not get lost from the rest of the patrol. Our Head of the Crew decided not to drop the bombs because he was concerned that they would hit on our National troops' lines. Therefore, we returned with all ammunition aboard. At 04:05 we were approaching the island. Thanks to expert piloting by Lieutenant Terracciano, the landing with the bombs aboard was very successful.

The next night, on April 21, 1938, was our twenty-second bombardment. The targets were the roads south of Castellan de la Plana to Sagunto. We had the same twenty bombs of 50 kilograms each. This time we had a patrol of five planes. Our pilot again was Lieutenant Terracciano. Takeoff was at 03:00. The weather was good. At 04:00 we were still in patrol. Under us was a dense layer of clouds, but toward the coast it looked clear. At 04:25 we reached the target and dropped the bombs. In spite of good visibility and a very low altitude of 500 meters the drops were not satisfactory. Some bombs did hit the railroad tracks and one bomb hit the road. We landed on the base at 05:45.

We were on the ground for seventeen days probably due to poor nocturnal

visibility. There was plenty of time for maintenance and other housekeeping chores on our plane and equipment. There was also enough time left for the trips in town to visit Margarita and go with her to the movies. Pierin and I played a lot of billiard games and caught up with writing letters home.

I don't remember exactly if it was during this period, but it was during one of the long periods when we were not flying, an International Inspection Delegation arrived at the Legionary Headquarters in Palma de Mallorca. It was supposed to check to see if no foreign troops were stationed on the island. Since we were all wearing legionary uniforms and had filed passports identifying us as legionaries, they departed satisfied with the apparent adherence to whatever the rules of the international agreement were. It all seemed a big farce to us. It was impossible that it was not known to England and other European countries that several squadrons from the Italian Air Force had volunteered with their airplanes. It seems that all they needed was to save appearances. It was almost obvious that most European governments preferred the Spain under the National forces of General Franco than under the Communist Republic.

In the first week of May we made a daytime flight of visual reconnaissance and flights to Son San Juan. Then on May 11, 1938 we had our twenty-third bombardment. This time the target was the Port of Valencia. We were carrying twenty bombs of 50 kilograms each. Our pilot again was Lieutenant Terracciano. The takeoff was at 20:45. The weather on the island was good. We were flying at an altitude of 3,700 meters. At 21:55 we reached the target and dropped the bombs. It was a magnificent bombardment. We made a direct hit on the pier of the port causing a fire maybe, or almost certainly, on a ship. The hit was spectacular considering our altitude of 4,000 meters. There was very scarce antiaircraft reaction. I counted seven searchlights but the antiaircraft fire was ineffective. We landed at the base at 23:00.

On May 13, 1938 we had our twenty-fourth bombardment. The target was again the Port of Valencia. We had aboard the usual twenty bombs of 50 kilograms each. And our pilot was once more Lieutenant Terracciano. Takeoff was at 21:00. The weather was mediocre. The mountains on the island were covered with thick clouds. We were flying at an altitude of 2,200 meters, climbing as we approached the target. At 22:20 we reached the target and just finished dropping the bombs. We were more skillful than I had believed. This time we made a direct hit of our target with more satisfactory results than on the previous night. Almost all bombs did fall directly on the port, where they made a huge explosion followed by a big fire. Our altitude was 3,500 meters. From the ground there was little response from the antiaircraft guns. We landed at our base after 23:30.

There was an interruption of twenty-five days in my entries in "The Book of Station" for our Airplane Number 4. I do not recall the reason for it. It was about this time that I found out that a sailor from an Italian submarine stationed in the Harbor of Palma de Mallorca was intensively courting Margarita. I had a big quarrel with her because I expected her to be committed to me. I asked her many questions that were popping in my mind one after another. Was she assuming that by making me jealous I would promise to marry her? Or was she calculating that the sailor was a better prospect? Or was she really going out with the Italian young man just for fun? I said that I couldn't figure out what her reason was for it.

But her reply was direct and simple, "You are a very young airman. Today you are

here - tomorrow you will be gone. What future is there for me with you? You cannot afford to marry me and take me to Italy because you don't have a steady job waiting there for you. I like you, but I don't want to grow too fond of you."

This incident really upset me. I behaved hastily and asked her to return my photograph and on the next day I returned her photo. We said a cold good-bye to each other and I didn't go to see her anymore.

After my sudden breakup with Margarita, I decided to make a request for a return to Italy. When I told my friend Pierin about my decision, he was glad to join me, as he was impatient to meet his *madrina,* with whom he thought he was in love by correspondence. We placed a request for a return to Italy with the commander of our group, Lieutenant Cornell Drago, and were waiting for our replacements that were to arrive soon.

There were several days of beautiful weather on the island and Pierin and I went to a nearby small grove to collect snails, which were abundant during that time of the year. Then we asked a woman who lived next to our quarters to cook us the snails with lots of garlic and parsley. They were delicious accompanied with a good bottle of Malaga wine.

On May 30, 1938 the Reds bombarded Palma di Mallorca,[21] damaging the port and the pier. Some houses were also hit. There was very little overall damage done to the city compared to the bombardment of December 7, 1937. Neither airport in Son San Juan or Saint Bonnet were damaged.

For several days we flew only the reconnaissance flights. On May 30 and June 1 we flew a daytime visual reconnaissance with Lieutenant Pilot Terracciano. Both flights were at a very high altitude of 4,500 meters. The first one was about two hours and a half to the Port of Sagunto and the second one was more then two hours to the Port of Valencia. On June 2 there was another daytime maritime reconnaissance flight with Lieutenant Vecchi. The mission was in the area of Dragonera, Valencia, and Castellon de la Plana. It was a long flight of four hours at a high altitude of 4,000 meters. On June 5 we flew with Second Lieutenant Volonterio to Salinas and Son San Juan. And on June 6 we flew another daytime visual reconnaissance flight off the shores of Barcelona with Second Lieutenant Salandin. It was only a two hour and twenty minute flight at a very high altitude of 4,200 meters.

On June 8, 1938 we flew our twenty-fifth bombardment mission. The target was the Port of San Feliu. We had twenty bombs of 50 kilograms each aboard. The pilot was Captain de Cecco. We were flying at an altitude of 2,500 meters. But because of adverse atmospheric conditions we had to return to the base and land with all cargo of bombs on board. We were lucky that all our pilots had an excellent training and handled the planes so smoothly that we trusted them without any reservations.

Our next mission was on June 16, 1938. It was our twenty-sixth bombardment. The target was again the Port of Valencia. We again had twenty bombs of 50 kilograms each aboard. The pilot was Captain de Cecco. Takeoff was at 00:15. On the island the weather was good with a light haze over the sea. We were flying at an altitude of 2,500 meters. There was good visibility. At 01:30 we reached our target and dropped the bombs. There were five search-lights and very few shots from antiaircraft guns. We made very good direct hits all along the port. There was a big fire in the port caused in the afternoon by the S.79ts from daytime bombardment patrol. We landed after 02:53.

The next day, on June 17, 1938 was our twenty-seventh bombardment. The pilot was again Captain de Cecco. This time there were several changes—we had a completely new target, the Port of Cartagena; our patrol had four planes, and we had four bombs of 250 kilograms each aboard. Before us another patrol of four planes departed for the same target. Cartagena had a reputation for having the best antiaircraft artillery and we were apprehensive about our flight there. We had a takeoff at 00:50. Weather was good. Visibility was optimal. I wrote in the "Book of Station": "It will be a little bit hard to pass the time tonight. We have more than four hours to fly to the target and back. At 02:00 we are at an altitude of 5,000 meters. It is very cold and I have a strong desire to sleep. I am skimming through a magazine to keep myself from falling asleep. We lowered our altitude to 3,800 meters and at 02:50 attacked the port from the rear. There are ten very potent searchlights that sometimes get a glimpse of us. There are numerous shots from their antiaircraft guns. It is very strange; out of the four bombs of 250 kilograms each only one exploded near the dock. From the others three bombs there were no results. So, we also made an acquaintance with Cartagena." We landed at our base after 04:50.

On June 19, 1938 we made the twenty-eighth bombardment. This time our target was Sabadel and specifically one machine shop for assembly and repairs of the airplanes located there. We had aboard twenty bombs of 50 kilograms each. Aboard were Major Buonamico and an Engineer of Repairs from our squadron. Takeoff was at 01:00. The weather was good. We were flying at an altitude of 3,200 meters. At 03:00 we reached the target and dropped the bombs in two passes. This tactic usually gave better results than one pass only. This was possible to do because there was very little antiaircraft reaction from the ground. We landed at our base on the island after 04:25.

On June 20, 1938 we had our twenty-ninth bombardment. In the "Book of Station" I wrote: "Tonight there is news that we are flying isolated with twenty bombs of 50 kilograms each. The other planes had loaded four bombs of 250 kilograms each. The target is the Airport of Manisese near Valencia. Our pilot tonight is Captain de Cecco. Takeoff is at 01:15. The weather is good – one-fourth coverage with high cumulus. At 02:25 we are navigating at an altitude of 2,800 meters between two layers of clouds. The target is almost invisible. They are searching for us from Valencia with searchlights. We are making the second passage over the target to drop the bombs and then proceed to fly back to the base. We landed after 04:14."

For some reason, I signed this entry not as usual only with my initials but with full legionnaire's name, Giulio Villani. Maybe it was in anticipation of my departure back to Italy and I wanted to leave my name in the "Book of Station" for those who would be keeping the records after I was gone.

On June 21, 1938 was our thirtieth bombardment. Our target was the Port of Valencia. Pilot was Major Buonamico. This time we had on board an unusual cargo of ten bomb mines. The takeoff was at 02:25. We were flying at an altitude of 2,800 meters. At 03:40 we reached the target and dropped the bombs. Although there was a heavy haze, our aim was very good. On the ground I counted seven searchlights, but there was very little antiaircraft reaction. We landed at the base after 05:00. This entry I signed with my full real name, Giulio Verro, which I wanted to remain recorded, because nobody knew me by my alias name.

On June 22, 1938 was our thirty-first bombardment. The target was the Port of

Barcelona. We had on board the usual twenty bombs of 50 kilograms each. Again the pilot was Major Buonamico. The takeoff was at 02:00. There was vanishing moonlight and one could see very little. We were flying at an altitude of 3,100 meters. Below everything was covered up with clouds. We found the city only after they had switched on their searchlights. To drop the bombs we had to make two passes over the target, one, at 03:15, and the other at 03:45 and then headed toward the island. We landed on our base at 04:50.

June 22, 1938 was my last entry in the "Book of Station" of Airplane Number 4 of the 251st Squadron Of Nocturnal Bombardment of the Legionary Air Force stationed on the Military Airport of San Bonnet on the Island of Mallorca during the Spanish Civil War. I signed this entry for the last time with my real name, Giulio Verro.

My total record of combat time in flight was 8,555 minutes or 142 hours and 35 minutes, verified and signed by the commandant of our squadron, Captain Pilot G. De Cecco.

Before my departure to Italy Captain De Cecco gave all members of his squadron a souvenir of their participation in the Spanish Civil War. It was a copy of the first page of a major Italian newspaper, "*Il Giornale d'Italia*."[22] It was mailed to him by the general from Rome with the congratulatory inscription: "To Captain De Cecco,[2] who at the command of a Patrol of S.81's made a hit of a fuel depository in Barcelona during the night of June 7, 1938, I make my sincere congratulations. Rome, 6/10/38. General Veldeoti."[23] The title and the subtitle of the article were: "65 Thousand Tons of Gasoline Are Burning From Tuesday in the Port of Barcelona. The bombardment of the war objectives was executed with fulminate precision by the Legionary Air Force."

On my copy Captain De Cecco made a personal dedication as he made to all members of our squadron who participated in such missions, although neither several others nor I were flying with him on that particular night. It was dated July 9, 1938.

When the two new radiotelegraphers and several other volunteer airmen arrived as replacements for us and for the others who were returning to Italy, we all got back our fictitious passports. Dressed again in our civilian clothes, in which we had arrived, we embarked on the mercantile and passenger ship "*Firenze*"[24] to return to Italy to the Port of Genoa.[25]

Before departure I told my friend Pierin that after all these years in the Air Force I had found that a military career was too senseless for me and that I had decided that upon my arrival in Italy I would request to be discharged from the military service. He agreed to do the same because he decided that if his *madrina* accepted his proposal he would get married soon.

Therefore, when we arrived back in our homeland we went to Rome to the headquarters of the Italian air ministry, where we were supposed to check in upon our return from Spain. At the same time we both requested a discharge from military service, which was granted to us, and we returned to our civilian status.

The last day together we visited the capital of our country, said good-bye to our military career, and promised to keep in touch by writing to each other. As a souvenir of that memorable event and wearing civilian clothes, Pierin and I made one more photo[26] in Rome sitting together on a wall of a monument with the background of the statue of the famous King Vittorio Emmanuele II, founder of the reunified Kingdom of Italy.

Dated September 9, 1938 the Italian Air Force Ministry awarded me with *La Croce*

al Merito di Guerra - Cross for War Merits in the Campaign of Spain, with *La Medaglia Commemorativa per la Campagna di Spagna.* - The Commemorative Medal for the Campaign of Spain, and with *La Medaglia di Benemerenza* - The Medal of Merit for Volunteers in the Campaign of Spain.

Then in a Decree dated May 2, 1940 I was awarded by the Italian Air Force Ministry *La Croce di Guerra al Valor Militare* - The Cross of War for Military Valor for the active voluntary mission of war in the Skies of Spain, November 1937 - March 1938.

Although my youthful enthusiasm to be able to fly and to see new places and adventure in foreign lands was rewarded, I learned that a military career was not for me. I was glad to return home to my family and to resume civilian life.

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1. Spanish Fascist dictator.
2. Territory in northwestern Africa.
3. Chancellor of Germany and leader of Nazi Party.
4. "The Green Mices" - from an Italian expression *Far vedere I sorci verdi* - To show the green mice, which means "To amaze or to astonish somebody with their actions."
5. Select Airman, the second rank in Italian Air Force.
6. *Quaderno di Stazione, Sevizio Radiotelegrafico d'Aeronautica, Stazione AKC*, *Aeroplano No. 4, della 192 Squadriglia di Bombardamento Terrestre di Aeronautica Italiana (Forli ,Febraio 24, 1937 - Novembre 20, 1937* [in Italian] [*Book of Station*, Radiotelegraphic Service, Station AKC, Airplane No.4, 192nd Squadron of Terrestrial Bombardment Formation of Italian Air Force (Forli, February 24, 1937 - November 20, 1937)] *e della 251 Squadriglia di Bombardamento Notturno di Aeronautica Legionaria (Palma de Mallorca, Novembre 21, 1937 - Jugno 22, 1938)* [in Italian] [and of the 251st Squadron of Terrestrial Nocturnal Bombardment of the Legionary Air Force (Palma de Mallorca, November 21, 1937 - June 22, 1938)]. Recorded by the Select Airman Radio-Telegrapher Giulio Verro [Giulio Villani, legionnair's alias] (Seal, *251. Squadriglia, B.N.*) [Seal, 251 Squadron, B.N.]Selected pages.
7. *Aviazione Legionaria*, *Stralci Voli di Pace, 251 Squadriglia B.N. Secondo Semestre 1937 - Primo Semestre 1938* [in Italian] [Legionaire Airforce, Excerpts of Peacetime Flights, 251 Squadron B.N, Second semester, 1937 - First Semester 1938]. . From a document issued to *AV. SC. R.T.* Verro Giulio [Aviere Scelto, Radio-Telegrapher Verro Giulio].
8. *Aviazione Legionaria*, *Stralci Voli di Guerra, 251 Squadriglia B.N. Secondo Semestre 1937 - Primo Semestre 1938* [in Italian] [Legionaire Airforce, Excerpts of Wartime Flights, Second Semester, 1937 - First Semester 1938]. From a document issued to *AV. SC. R.T.* Verro Giulio [Aviere Scelto, Radio-Telegrapher Verro Giulio].
9. "All for the Fatherland" [in Spanish].
10. Italian island in the Tyrrhenian Sea.
11. A group of Spanish islands in the Mediterranean Sea.
12. Major island of the Balearic Islands.
13. *Bombardamento Notturno* [in Italian] - Night bombardment.
14. Head Radio-Telegrapher.
15. From the copy of the *Garnet Militar de Identidad* [in Spanish] - Military Identity Card.
16. Bats.
17. From the photographs dated: 7/9/37 and 7/12/37 [as of North American convention: month, day, and year. Note that on the photo the dates are stated according to the European convention: day, month, and year].
18. The time throughout this chapter is kept as recorded in the "*Quaderno di Stazione*"as of the European convention - time begins at 00:01, or one minute past midnight and it ends at 24:00 the following midnight.
19. Cuenca - in English.
20. Leaflets printed in Spanish, private collection of Olga Gladky Verro.
21. From the photographs made after the bombardment.
22. *Il Giornale d'Italia,* No. 137 [in Italian] (Rome, Friday, June 10, 1938).
23. Name of the general not completely legible.

24. From the photographs aboard the ship "*Firenze*" - Florence.
25. Italian port in the Tyrrhenian Sea.
26. From the photograph in Rome.

Chapter 7

Italy Allies With Germany

As Remembered by Giulio Verro
Translated and Edited by Olga Gladky Verro

When I returned from Spain in the summer of 1938 I went to see Signor Bargero[1] and asked him if he knew someplace where I could apply for a job. He found me a place to work in a small factory, which made little motors for some military equipment. After I worked there a few months, Signor Bargero came to see me with the news that STIPEL[2] was searching for telephone servicemen and, if I was interested in working there, he would recommend me to Engineer Sartorio, whom he knew well. Of course I was more then interested, this was exactly the job that my father always suggested to me, public service; more than that, STIPEL was considered a prestigious company with many fringe benefits, good pay, and opportunity for advancement through training on the job and company-sponsored technical training. I was very grateful to my teacher and friend Signor Bargero, who had the confidence in me to give me a good recommendation.

My previous employer was very upset that I was leaving after he had trained me for the job. He said that he had the right to keep me from leaving under a special government provision for industries that were supplying parts for military hardware. But he said that he wouldn't do that out of respect for Signor Bargero.

I was hired at the STIPEL as an apprentice to work with the team of telephone installers. I was instructed to come to the workshop at the STIPEL building and from there to travel with the telephone installers crew on the streetcar or bus to wherever the work assignment was for that day. My perception was that I would be helping and learning to install the telephones, which I considered to be a nice and clean job. I was so eager to make a good impression that the first day I came to work all dressed up in a suit, good shirt, and a tie. The other workers at the workshop who were dressed in work-clothes just looked at me smiling and made a few jokes. However, before the crew went to take the streetcar to go to our place of work, I received the overalls, STIPEL uniform hat, and a black leather bag with the tools from the company stockroom.

When we arrived at the Hospital Mulinette, one of the largest hospitals in Turin, and I saw the type of work we had to do there, I understood why my coworkers had made fun of my elegant appearance. The crew was adding the new internal telephone lines and was installing lead cables from the switchboard to the various hospital wards and offices. From the first day I began on-the-job training by helping an experienced telephone line installer by the name Pavia to install those heavy lead cables.

The workday at the STIPEL started at eight o'clock in the morning. At noon we had two full hours break, which was sufficient time to take the streetcar home, eat lunch, rest a little, and return to work by two o'clock in the afternoon. Then we had to work four more hours until six in the evening. At that time this schedule was very common in most offices and public service enterprises, which did not work in shifts.

We worked at the hospital for about three weeks. During that time we had a chance to socialize with hospital employees, especially with the young women. There I met one young switchboard operator, Elsa, who was about my age. She had red hair with a copper tint that I liked right away. She also had good manners and a somewhat shy personality. Her father was the head of the hospital maintenance.

Before our crew completed the installation work at the Mulinette Hospital, I showed Elsa a lot of attention and invited her to go on Sunday to the movies, which she accepted. That Sunday afternoon I was surprised that Elsa came to the movies not alone, but also brought her younger sister Rita, who was just a teenager. During that summer I met Elsa's parents, who were very religious and strict with their two daughters. From that time on, when we were going out to the movies or just for a walk, we always had Elsa's younger sister with us as a kind of chaperone. I was also visiting Elsa at home on Sundays, again under the vigilant eyes of her strict parents. It seems that they did approve of my courting their daughter; however, they made sure not to allow us to be alone. Occasionally I was able to find a few moments to give her a furtive kiss.

Although my youthful passion was restricted to hands-off behavior, I valued their protective attitude toward their daughter. But I was not sure if Elsa was shy and not able to express her feelings toward me, or that she was obediently maintaining the standard behavior established by her parents. They were extremely religious, attended Mass every Sunday, and strictly followed all the rules established by the Catholic Church.

When we finished the plant in the hospital, we were sent to work out of town in the nearby hamlet of Pinerolo and we had to take a bus every morning to get there. We were installing the telephone lines in a small factory which was located in an old building, and for some reason we had to place the lead cables very high on the wall. To help Pavia install the heavy lead cables, we had to climb on tall and shaky ladders and hold the cable rolls while Pavia wired them on the wall.

After I learned the tricks of the trade, I was given assignments to make small installations on my own, mostly in offices and factories where they needed to add one or two telephone lines. I liked working in different places and to meeting many interesting people. There was no pressure on the job since the company had a policy of always making the customer happy, and that meant we had to take all the time necessary to do the job well.

As before my departure for military service, I was bringing my salary home and giving it to my mother, leaving myself only enough for my personal expenses and recreation. She took care of buying me all the shirts, underwear, socks, hankies, and whatever else I needed. What she was able to save was left for the needs of the family, unexpected expenses or any emergencies.

When I was in Spain, I was sending home the usual part of my military pay as I did before in Italy. But as volunteers our pay had increased and I saved some money from the portion of my military pay that I kept for myself. When I returned home, I allowed myself the luxury of buying a very good camera. I also needed new outfits, since I had outgrown out of all my old clothes. With my savings and with the money that my mother saved from what I was sending home, I was finally able to afford a good new winter coat and a new suit. And my old, but not worn out, clothes were passed on to my younger brother Domenico, who had grown so fast during the time I was away that they fit him just right.

My mother accompanied me to the tailor who, as she heard, was a good master. We selected the fabric and she made sure that whatever I liked was good and strong wool that would last for many years. She also bargained hard with the tailor for the cost of labor. She also accompanied me to buy new shirts and shoes because she had to be sure that I was buying good quality merchandise at an affordable price.

In May 1939 Mussolini and Hitler signed a military assistance pact. Shortly after that Germany seized Bohemia and Moravia and the Italian Armed Forces invaded and annexed the small neighboring state of Albania. Then in September of that year Germany invaded Poland and this event sparked the beginning of World War II. Mussolini was watching Hitler annexing the neighboring states, and, although Italy had not yet officially entered the war, with his speeches *Il Duce* was preparing the Italians that it could happen at any moment. In anticipation of war, a draft started for some selected branches of the Armed Forces.

I was drafted in the fall of 1939. For several months I was stationed in Turin at the Cavour Military Barracks waiting to be assigned to the new unit of the Air Force. There was no military training or exercises for us there; it was just plain waiting and waiting. Once we were accounted for in the morning we could leave the barracks and return to be accounted for in the evening. Being stationed in my hometown, I was spending more time in my house than in the barracks. We were also allowed to have leaves on Sundays and I visited Elsa and we went to the movies or for walks in Valentino Park along the River Po.

Finally, in the first months of 1940 I was transferred to Rome, where the Air Force assembled their draftees. In Rome we were stationed in military barracks near the Roman ruins of Torraccia. Again, there were many long months of waiting while Mussolini was deciding on the right moment to enter the war.

On June 10, 1940 Mussolini announced that Italy was entering the war.

Then, in the fall of 1940 the Air Force assigned me to a small flight assistance unit for the Italian Air Force. The unit was self-sufficient in its operations and for this purpose had four trucks especially equipped for the specific tasks we were to perform. One truck had a power generator working on gasoline and it supplied electricity for operating all other equipment. The second truck had emergency, repair, and spare parts, tools, and equipment for the whole unit and it towed a small trailer with radiotelegraphic equipment and a radio-goniometer.[3] The third truck was equipped as a field kitchen. And the fourth truck was equipped inside as a trailer with camp beds to sleep on and to transport us, the servicemen.

We were ordered to drive our trucks to the railroad station where all the trucks were loaded on the railroad platform cars. All servicemen that were needed to operate this unit traveled in passenger cars. We traveled north across Europe to Belgium, where we were assigned to the CAI,[4] Corpus of Italian Air Force, stationed near Brussels.

In September 1940 we arrived at our destination in a small town called Espinettes, located about halfway between Brussels and Waterloo. There we set up our Flight Assistance Center. Our assignment was to assist in flight the Italian bombers BR-22,[5] that arrived in Belgium in October 1940. The intention of Mussolini was to participate with the German *Luftwaffe* in bombardments of London across the English Channel.

We were stationed in a school and our office with the equipment was in a nearby

villa of a rich Jew had who managed to escape. We were receiving meteorological bulletins and passing the information to our Italian Air Force Unit and to the Italian airplanes flying in the area. In my free time from service duties I admired the beautiful small villas and clean streets of Espinettes on my walks and managed to explore historic Waterloo, and the city of Brussels. I even ventured to see the English Channel, which was not difficult to do via good public transportation on streetcars, on which we military men could ride free.

By the time the Italian Air Force Squadron was ready to operate, the cold winter weather began to interfere with flying the missions. The BR-22 bombers were not built to withstand the climate with freezing temperatures that formed ice on the aircraft and they either could not take off or were falling down. After several months of trying, the whole Italian Air Force operation was cancelled and in the first months of winter 1941 we were ordered back home.

We again loaded our trucks with all the equipment and drove them to the railroad station, where they were put this time on a troop-train of Germans traveling south. Again we crossed Europe, this time all the way back to Rome. Our officers, who were more sophisticated than us simple draftees, used this opportunity to smuggle lots of famous Belgian hunting guns and prestigious furs.

Back in Rome we were housed again in the same barracks and had to wait again to see where our command would send us next. In Rome I had a big surprise to find my old friend Pierin Panzeri, who was assigned to our unit. It was a joyous reunion for both of us and while we were waiting the new orders, we had plenty of time to remember our adventures in Spain. Pierin had gotten married to his military *madrina* (military pen pal) and seemed to be very happy.

While our unit was still in Belgium, toward the end of October 1940, Italy began to occupy Greece. Our troops encountered bad weather and many impassable roads at that time of the year and they had great opposition from the Greek Army. In the winter of 1941 our troops had been pushed back to the border of Albania. Mussolini had to ask Germans to come to the rescue and in a few weeks they occupied Greece. Italian troops and planes were deployed there as auxiliary units to help the Germans in the occupation of Greece and to free many of their men to fight elsewhere.

In the beginning of summer 1941 our Unit of Flight Assistance was again ordered to load our trucks on railroad freight cars. We were given provisions of bread and canned food for three days and were dispatched to Bari.[6] For some unknown reason our cars were detached from the train in the freight yard of Milanazzo. We were left there for more than one week. When our food supplies were finished we started to spend our own money to buy something to eat, but after ten days most of us had spent all the money we had.

We decided to go to the infantry unit stationed in the village of Milanazzo and to ask them if they could feed us. We told the officer in charge that for ten days we were abandoned in the freight yard. He ordered that we be given what was left of their soup after they had fed their soldiers. In addition, he contacted the military authorities and we finally were attached to another train going to Bari. There we were placed again in military barracks to wait for our next destination. Finally, our Unit of Flight Assistance was ordered to be loaded on a ship going to Albania, which at that time was already occupied by the Italian Army.

On July 11, 1941 we were disembarked at the Port of Valona, town of Durazzo,[1] and from there we drew our trucks to Tirana, the capital city of Albania. There, our unit with all the trucks was placed in a big courtyard and we had to wait again for orders to proceed for Athens, the capital of Greece.

In Tirana there were many other Italian military units and as we waited we had time to walk in the city. One serviceman from our unit who was in charge of the electrical generator truck found out from other servicemen that in Greece there was a bad shortage of food and that those who could buy some non-perishable staples in Albania and smuggle them to Greece could make very good money. He said that he himself didn't have the money and asked if somebody would like to make a fifty-fifty deal with him and finance one hundred liras for the purchase of one bag of beans. He would take care of finding the beans, hiding the contraband food in his truck, and selling it in Greece.

I told him that I liked the idea, but I didn't have the money either. It just happened that, shortly after, I encountered a young man whom I knew well from my school years. He used to live in Turin on Corso Novara Street a couple of houses from where I lived. I asked him if he had one hundred liras that he could loan to me and I would ask my mother to return that amount to his parents in Turin. He agreed and gave me the money. All excited I returned to my unit and entrusted the money to our electrician, who immediately bought a bag of beans and hid it in his truck. "You will see," he told me, "we will make good money." I wrote right away to my mother to take one hundred liras to my friend's parents.

This time the orders came sooner than in any other place we had waited. We received supplies of crackers and cans of meat for the journey and enough gasoline for our trucks to drive all the way to Athens. It took us about a week or ten days to reach our destination. On our way we added to our diet by exchanging some gasoline with the Albanian peasants for eggs. But as soon as we crossed the border, the Greek population didn't have enough food for themselves. I remember in one of the villages that we traveled through I saw a small skinny boy sitting on the side of the road eating grass. I thought, *This is hunger*.

When we arrived in Athens our Air Force Headquarters directed us to establish our Flight Assistance Center in the village of Cocovanes, about thirty kilometers from the city of Athens on the road to the Airport of Tatoi. All servicemen were accommodated in the village school building, while six of our officers and the German interpreter, who was also a liaison person with the German headquarters, lived in the city of Athens.

As soon as the electrician-entrepreneur could get into the city of Athens with the bag of our contraband beans he sold them to some restaurant owner. However, he came to me with a very disappointed face and said that the business did not go well. He said that when the buyer opened the bag all the beans were full of sprouts and therefore he had to sell them at half of the cost price. I certainly didn't believe his story but there was no way to check it. So, he gave me half of what he said he sold them for, reminding me of our fifty-fifty agreement. I finished with a big loss and two important lessons. One lesson that I learned was: "Business is a very risky business." And the other lesson was: "You have to know the person with whom you are doing business well."

A few weeks after we had settled in, more servicemen arrived making a total of

about thirty men to serve in our center. Among the newly arrived was a young man from Florence, Bruno Zanobini, who almost immediately became mine and Pierin's friend. His parents were small merchants and only recently had lost their delicatessen store due to bankruptcy. But Bruno and his older sister had grown up when the family was moderately prosperous and Bruno had graduated from middle school; in the future this was very important in opening doors for him to many occupations and further education. He was about two years younger then I and was well read, which distinguished him from Pierin Panzeri. He had a mild and accommodating character, good manners, and was well balanced in dealing with people and situations. I liked his Florentine accent as it reminded me of my childhood when I lived in Tuscany in the little village of Asciano near Pisa.

Bruno was also a radiotelegrapher and we were working in three shifts giving change to each other in the center. This bound the three of us even more closely together as we shared many tasks and responsibilities in our work. There was only one warrant officer who knew radiotelegraphy; he was involved with paperwork in the office, but was available in emergencies to substitute for one of us.

One of the functions of our Flight Assistance Center was to assist the Italian Air Force airplanes that were flying in the Mediterranean Sea to the Airport on the Island of Lero, the Greek Island that was given to Italy after World War I. We would track their positions with the radio-goniometer and transmit the data to them by the radiotelegraph. Another function of our center was to receive meteorological bulletins and to submit them in writing to the Italian Air Force Headquarters in Athens, as well as to the pilots, when requested.

The center had its own field kitchen and each serviceman took charge of it for one month on a rotation basis; however, the cooking was done by a Greek cook who also cooked separate meals for the officers. In the school building where all servicemen lived were located our center's offices and two separate mess halls, one for the servicemen and another for the officers.

One warrant officer was in charge of food provisions, which were stored on the premises in a storage room. In our first year there the staples and other nonperishable provisions such as pasta, beans, canned meat, marmalade, and wine were brought to Greece from Italy for all Italian troops stationed there.[7] During that period we had a sufficient quantity of food in the storage room. Some fresh vegetables and occasionally meats came from local sources. During the second year delivery of provisions from Italy became irregular and, although most of the time our diet was adequate, shortages in some foods lowered the quantity and quality of our meals, resulting in discontent toward our warrant officer.

I remember one episode that happened to me during one such food shortage. That day we had a watery soup for lunch and I was so disgusted with it that I took the soup and went to complain to the warrant officer, who was eating at the officer's dining room.

"What kind of soup is this?" I asked him, placing the soup in front of him on the table. "It's only water with a few lonely pieces of pasta swimming in it."

The warrant officer pushed away the plate, showing his annoyance at being disturbed during his lunchtime, and answered sternly, "Don't you know that there is a war going on? We have to cook with what supplies we can get!"

I was not too happy with his answer and defiantly told him, “I feel sick. I cannot start my duty after lunch.” This meant that another warrant officer had to substitute for me and no one was happy to do it under the hot afternoon sun.

“If you are sick, go right away to the Airport Infirmary to see the doctor!” ordered the warrant officer and added, “I will call him that you are coming.”

I grabbed my plate and defiantly poured the soup in the garbage pail and walked out of the dining room. Then I went to the road leading to the airport, where I got a ride on one of the German trucks.

Knowing that the doctor had received a call from my superiors, I saluted him and presenting myself boldly, “Doctor, the slacker[8] has arrived!”

The young doctor calmly ordered to me, “Here, sit down. Let me take your temperature.”

“What for?” I asked him. “Didn’t they call you from the center?”

“Never mind about that. I need to take your temperature anyway.”

I obeyed him and sat quietly thinking that as a punishment I would lose my Sunday leave. The doctor took the thermometer from me and said, “Hmm... Thirty-seven -and-a-half degrees.[9] Two days of rest and you will be good as new. And keep out of the sun.”

I couldn’t believe my ears.

Then the doctor commented that I had a Piedmont[10] accent.

“Yes,” I told him, “I am from the city of Turin.”[11]

After hearing this, he began to talk to me in Piedmontese[12] and told me that he was also from Turin, that he was drafted into the military service as soon as he completed his medical studies. We chatted for a while about our city, the war, and military life. Meanwhile he wrote a note ordering two days of rest for me. I was most grateful to him for saving me from punishment.

The dry and hot weather of Greece and the location of our center on the outskirts of the village allowed the servicemen to dress casually in shorts and with or without athletic shirts. Although our equipment was under tents placed in the field, we spent a lot of time in the open under the sun and we all had a nice dark tan. However, the Greek villagers were not happy and complained to our officers that their young women were exposed every day to the indecency of seeing half-naked young men.

When we were not on duty, there was not much for us to do in the village. To have a good time we had to travel to Athens, where many German and Italian troops were stationed. To get there was easy; we just had to ask for a ride on any of the many German trucks driving on the road from the airport to the capital. In Athens there were many places of entertainment catering to the German and Italian military. There were movie theaters and *cafés* where servicemen could find Greek wine spiced with retsina, and have drinking bouts and a company of women.

During the day, those of us who could appreciate the history could visit the Parthenon[13] and other archeological sites, where I made lots of pictures with my camera.[14] We also visited museums, which were open to visitors. I usually went to these places with my new friend Bruno Zanobini, who shared my curiosity about historical places. We went on those days when it was Pierin’s shift at the radio-telegraph station because he didn’t care much about history or antiquities.

Many times our young German interpreter Toni joined us because he appreciated

our knowledge of ancient Greek history, which we had learned in our Italian schools, and he was eager to learn from us what he hadn't learned in his German school. He liked to be in our company and he befriended the three of us so much that, before he went home to Germany on a military leave, he brought us a present, a large portrait of *Fuhrer*, as the Nazi's called Hitler. Although we were not impressed with his gift, we decided not to offend our friend and attached the portrait above our lockers. Then one day it disappeared without anybody noticing it.

In the summer of 1942 I went on a military leave home. In my correspondence with Elsa we decided that during the leave we would have our engagement and would set the date for our wedding for the next time I came home on leave.

During my departure on leave from the Athens Airport, I encountered the First Pilot Lieutenant Terracciano, whom I hadn't seen since our legionary campaign in Spain. I told him that I was going home to have my engagement and to set the wedding date with my fiancée. He shook his head and tried to discourage me from taking that step at that time. He explained that being in the military service and especially during the war—no one knew when it would end—would keep us apart for too long time, and many things could happen during that time. I knew that previously he had problems with his wife and attributed his opinion to his personal experience. I sympathized with him and respectfully listened to his advice, but my youthful enthusiasm didn't allow me to give much importance to his wise words.

During my short leave at home we had our engagement and our families finally got acquainted. We set our wedding date and to please her parents we agreed to have it the next year on the religious holiday of Virgin Mary in the month of August 1943. My uncle Pietro volunteered to take responsibility to prepare all the necessary documents required for marriage. He also gave us an engagement gift, a print reproduction of "Madonna with Child" by Murillo, and I entrusted it for safekeeping to Elsa.

All preparations for the engagement took so much of our time that we had very little time to be together alone. But at least this time I was able to be alone with her without her sister chaperoning; however, Elsa made me behave properly, allowing me only a few kisses and embraces. I was hoping that after being married she would be free to express her feelings with more spontaneity.

The leave passed very quickly and, in addition, to be on time at my center I had to depart a few days early because ahead of me was a long journey on the train back to Greece.

When I returned to the center, I told my friends Pierin and Bruno that it was wise of me to have bought the engagement ring on my previous leave, because now it was impossible to buy golden wedding rings in Italy. By the order of *Il Duce*, the sale of gold jewelry was prohibited, because all gold had to be used to pay for the war expenses. My friend Pierin was going on military leave soon after my arrival. Before departure he promised me that maybe he could find one ring for me from his aunt. Indeed, when he returned to Greece, he brought the golden wedding ring and told me that it was his present for my future wedding. I was very impressed with my friend's generosity. I immediately secured the ring with a security pin inside of a breast pocket of my uniform jacket and only my friend Pierin knew that it was hidden there.

In the early summer of 1943 I applied for a marriage leave and was waiting for the papers to arrive. However, the invasion of southern Italy by the Allies in July

changed the political and military situation. All military leaves were cancelled until further instructions from the Italian military headquarters. I notified my parents that my leave was cancelled and I wrote to Elsa that I regretted that we had to postpone our wedding because all the leaves were cancelled for an indefinite period of time. The radio from Italy was downplaying the seriousness of the events. However, our Air Force headquarters in Athens was functioning as usual. We also continued our service duties in the established routine.

Then other unexpected events took place between Elsa's family and mine. First, I received a very long letter from my mother, in which she wrote that the two families had exchanged harsh words on account of the original of my birth certificate, which was required for marriage purposes. The very religious parents of Elsa could not accept that I was an adopted son and that I was born to an unwed mother. They accused the family of hiding this fact, which should have been presented to them before the engagement last year. Although my uncle Pietro tried hard to moderate the tempers, he thought that time was needed to smooth the ruffled feathers on both sides.

A very short and detached letter from Elsa followed my mother's letter. She wrote that maybe it was for the best that my leave was cancelled, because unexpected and very serious complications had arisen when her parents saw my original birth certificate document, which was required by the Catholic Church for a church wedding. Her parents were very upset that this was not disclosed before the engagement and that now they were absolutely against this marriage. She finished her short letter by saying, "Only if it's God's will, will we get married."

Elsa's letter upset me immensely. If she loved me, how could she resign herself to a decision by her parents? Not even one word that she didn't agree with their decision; not even one word of consolation for me, just a reference to God. I couldn't share these details with my friends. I could not reveal such intimate facts about my mother; it was important for me to protect her reputation. I only told them that there were some quarrels between the two families without going into details and that my marriage was put on hold for now.

On that weekend Pierin and I went to Athens to the usual bar that we patronized. And for the first time in my life I got so drunk that I lost some of my inhibitions. I remember well that I climbed on the table and began to recite poetry, gesticulating like an actor on the stage. Pierin, as usual when he was drinking too much, began to cry and tell me that he was born unlucky, and complained that his parents didn't love him. Well, after all I was not so drunk, because seeing my friend in that deplorable condition; I stopped my theatrical performance and took care of my friend by bringing him back to our dormitory.

In Italy, the military situation and the political events that followed were developing and changing very quickly. We were able to hear the news from Italy on the radio and we could anticipate dramatic changes in our country in the near future. So far, the Italian military headquarters in Athens was functioning as usual, and our center was working without any changes in our mission. However, we could anticipate that the events in Italy would also be felt here soon. We had no other choice but to wait for orders from our high military command, because our situation was out of our control; in fact, it seemed to be completely out of the control of our Italian government.

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1. See the chapter “Giulio Is Growing Up.”

2. STIPEL – acronym for *Societa Telefonica Interregionale Piemonte e Lombardia* - Interregional Telephone Company of Piedmont and Lombardy.

3. Radio direction finder.

4. *Corpo Aereo Italiano*.

5. *Bombardiere Rosatelli-22* - Bomber Rosatelli-22.

6. Italian town and port on the Thyrrenian Sea.

7. In the Italian Armed Forces one glass of wine at lunch was given to each serviceman as a part of his daily food ration at that time.

8. Military slang for a person who evades his duty.

9. On the Celcium scale 36.6 degrees is considered to be a normal temperature for human body.

10. Piedmont region in northwestern Italy.

11. Capital city of the Piedmont region.

12. Dialect spoken in the Piedmont region.

13. The Doric Temple of Athena built in the 5th century B.C. on the Acropolis in Athens.

14. The numerous photos madede Giulio in Greece.

Chapter 8

Italian Armistice

As Remembered by Giulio Verro
Translated and Edited by Olga Gladky Verro

On July 10, 1943 the Allied Forces landed on the Island of Sicily. On July 25, 1943 it was announced on Italian radio that King *Vittorio Emanuele III* asked for and accepted the resignation of Benito Mussolini from his duties as chief of government, prime minister, and secretary of state and appointed in his place Marshal of Italy Pietro Badoglio, and that the king himself was assuming the command of Armed Forces. Having lost Mussolini as their ally, the Germans poured their troops into Italy to control the military situation.

After the Allies occupied a part of southern Italy, the king and Badoglio's government established themselves in the southern part of Italy at Salerno.[1] On September 8, 1943 we heard on Italian radio that the king had signed an armistice between the Italian Kingdom and the Allies, ceasing all warfare between the two sides. And on October 13, 1943 Prime Minister Badoglio announced that the king had declared war on Germany.

Meanwhile, in October 1943 Mussolini, with the help of the Germans, formed a government in northern Italy that he named the Italian Social Republic, also known as the Republic of Salo, taking its name from the small village on the western shore of Lake Garda where it was located. Political and civil chaos erupted in the country now divided into two parts.

Our Flight Assistance unit stationed in Greece was equipped with radio receivers and we could follow most of what was announced by the two Italian governments. But our military command headquarters in Athens was not issuing any explanations or orders to us about the situation, or which of these two governments was in charge of our military units in Greece. We continued our duties as we had before.

For about a week after the armistice there were no changes in our situation at the Flight Assistance center. Then one morning our German interpreter came without our Italian officers, with whom he had usually come before; instead he came with a German officer who announced that since Italy was no longer Ally with the Germany they would send us back to Italy.

After that announcement, we didn’t see our Italian officers anymore. German officer ordered us to give up all our weapons, radio, and other communication equipment, and all trucks. We didn’t question the authority of the Germans to requisition it because it seemed logical that they would not allow us to take it back to Italy. The German officer also ordered us to stay in our dormitory and wait for further orders. We were all so happy, innocently believing that for us the war was over. Only a few young men who had Greek girlfriends didn’t want to go back home and they disappeared soon after this announcement.

In a couple of days Germans came and collected our weapons. They told us to get ready and wait for the train that would take us home. We divided among ourselves all food provisions remaining in the storage room and packed them in our military backpacks for the journey.

On the day when we were packing our belongings, Toni, the German interpreter, came to see us to say good-bye. He was sitting on one of the bunk beds chatting with us when we moved the locker and behind it found the wrinkled and dusty portrait of Adolf Hitler that Toni had given us as a present. I don't remember if it was Bruno or I, but one of us grabbed the portrait and started to dust it and smooth it out. Then Toni, indignant at how disrespectfully we had treated his *Fuhrer*, took it from us and shaking his head mumbled German swear words at us, "*Ferfluchte Italianische Menschen.*"[2] After this happened, Toni's good-bye lost its friendliness he had for us before.

We waited again about two days before the Germans came with the truck and took us to the railroad station in Athens. There was a long train with freight cars already filled with Italian soldiers and *Alpini,*[3] who saluted us as we were passing by to our freight car. Anticipating a journey home, a general joyous mood prevailed among the young Italian servicemen. We could hear an Italian folk song accompanied by a guitar coming from one of the cars.

When the train finally started its voyage north it was moving slowly at about thirty kilometers per hour. It was hot and many young men climbed on the car roofs, where the breeze made it more pleasant to travel. As we were crossing Greek territory, the train stopped often and waited sometimes for a half-hour or more at the stations. There were about thirty men in each freight car. From the time we boarded the train in Athens we were left without any food for three days. We were lucky that each of us was carrying in our military backpacks the provisions that we had divided from our storage room.

As the train continued to travel north across Yugoslavia, the weather changed. It was cold and the men no longer climbed on the car roofs and, to keep the cold air out, we all closed the car doors. It took a while for somebody to notice that the train did not change direction at some point and, instead of turning south toward Italy, it continued to travel north. But even when we became aware of this, we probably were not worrying about it, guessing that maybe it had to make a detour, which was very common during wartime.

After the train entered the territory of former Austria, a large number of German soldiers surrounded the train and locked all the doors of the freight cars so no one would attempt to escape. After this happened, our hopes of going home vanished. In Austria the train continued to travel north. After that, the only food we received each day was about one liter of watered-down soup made with turnips and no bread. The men from our unit still had some food in their backpacks, which some of us decided to ration to ourselves.

Finally, one evening when it was almost dark, the train stopped near an enormous camp encircled with barbwire. The German soldiers counted about twenty five men from each car and directed each group to the earth barracks. Actually, those were holes dug into the earth and covered with roofs.

When we got inside, a strong smell of humid earth enveloped us. It was dark and there wasn't any light at all. To orient ourselves, we lighted a few matches and saw low

wooden platforms about one foot from the ground, and everybody hurried to find himself a place to sleep. As I put my backpack on it and sat down, I told to myself, "Giulio, you will never get out of here." In the dark I fell asleep with the gloomiest scenario about my future.

In the morning we were allowed to get out of the earth barracks and I heard one young Italian singing, "*Ci sposeremo a maggio con tante rose, con tante rose*..."[4] and it gave me hope that not all was lost. As I looked around, I saw many men, all from the Italian Air Force, Army, and *Alpini*. The camp was in a large open field and one could not see where it ended. The low roofs rising from the ground like huge mushrooms seemed to continue without end beyond the horizon. In the front, however, one could see barbwire running and disappearing beyond the roofs of a few wooden buildings for the guards and the kitchen. Somebody found out that we were in the northern part of *Oberschlesia*[1] in a camp where the Germans had kept Jews before.

Probably the camp was so far from the nearest villages that the Germans allowed us to be outside all day long. During the three days that we were kept in that camp we had only one meal a day, the watered-down soup made with turnips and no bread. Soon somebody discovered that there were some wild rabbits running around; they caught them and roasted them on a fire made from dry grasses.

On the second day, several Italian officers arrived in the camp and invited us to enroll in the Army of the Italian Social Republic, which was allied with Germany. The officers were promising that this was the only chance to get out of the camp and to return to northern Italy; those who did not enroll would be prisoners of war. It was surprising that from that mass of young soldiers there were only about two-dozen who actually enrolled; the rest opted to become prisoners of war.

On the third day the Germans began to take groups of one hundred-fifty to two hundred prisoners and lead them to the guard building. Pierin Panzeri, Bruno Zanobini, and I, who were in the same barrack, were in one of the first groups taken that day. We were assigned prisoner numbers, mine was 14477, and we were again put in the freight cars. The train took us directly to the small town of Laband[5] in Oberschlesia.[6]

The first stop was in a building equipped with showers and disinfection facilities where we had to undress and turn over all our clothing and luggage to be disinfected. From there we were led to the camp, named Lager Laband.

It was a standard camp with wooden barracks surrounded by barbwire. It was built right in the middle of a populated area. The camp was divided into several sections for the English, Soviet, and Italian prisoners of war, and one section was for the foreign workers, who were mostly French. In the camp there were already many Italian prisoners of war who had arrived there before us. From them we learned about the daily camp routine and many shrewd and practical ways of dealing with everyday life in captivity.

The three of us, Pierin, Bruno, and I, were assigned to the barrack named "Susi," Room number 95. The inside of the barracks was also standard, with bunk beds covered with straw filled mattresses and pillows, a small cast-iron stove, wooden tables, and benches. There were about twenty men assigned to our room. Bruno, Pierin, and I chose bunk beds where we could stay close to each other. Pierin and I chose to stay on the lower level and Bruno took the upper level of my bed. We consoled ourselves that this was much better than the camp where we stayed up on our arrival in Germany.

That evening we received the standard watered-down soup made with turnips and our first ration of bread, which, we were told, should be enough until tomorrow evening. One rectangular loaf of a heavy dark bread of about two pounds had to be divided between two men. As we were staying in line waiting for the bread, the old-timers told us how to divide it fairly by hiding the two halves behind the back and asking your partner to select either the bread held in the right or left hand.

We also found out very quickly that the latrines were outside in a separate wooden building, as were the lavatories, showers, and laundry tubs, none of which had hot water. There were many men that told us they didn't take a full shower because of that. But some, including Bruno and me, dared to have one quick shower right away, and thereafter every week, no matter how cold it was.

The next day our German *Lagerfuhrer,* with the help of an Italian interpreter, interviewed us about our skills and occupations. Bruno and I declared ourselves to be telephone repairmen and Pierin decided to declare himself as a student, hoping to get an easier job. Right after the interview, we were ordered to form a column and under the supervision of the German guard with a gun across his shoulder were led to the place of our work, the *Presswerke Laband* factory. When we arrived there, Bruno and I were assigned right away to the telephone repair shop, and Pierin was assigned to the group to unload coal from the railroad platforms.

The head of the telephone department was a German engineer, *Herr* Kamionka, who was also a political boss of the Nazi Party in the town of Laband and in the factory. In the telephone repair shop there were four other men beside us. There were two German telephone technicians, Kochalla and Kramer, whom everybody called by their last names. They were responsible for all phases of the telephone system in the factory. Then there was a young Polish man named Rufin, who was allowed only to install telephones, while Kochalla always made the connections. And there was a Frenchman, Emile, who made repairs on telephones in the shop. All foreign workers for some reason were called only by their first names. Bruno and I were also presented and later called only by our first names. We were told that our job will be to help Emile in the shop to repair the telephones and, when needed, to help repair or to put the new telephone cables between the departments and the telephone switchboard that was located in the office building standing at the entrance gate to the factory.

Right from the start Bruno and I considered ourselves very lucky to have been placed there. All workers in the shop were friendly with us. When nobody was in the shop, Kochalla shared his lunch sandwiches with us. Emile and Rufin were more than friendly with us; they showed us a sincere camaraderie. Both Bruno and I knew enough French from our school days; beside that, the Italian language, especially my Piedmont dialect, was helpful to us in communicating with Emile, who in turn spoke well in German and would translate the orders to us and explain the work that we had to do. In fact, Bruno and I improved our French considerably just by talking with Emile many hours a day.

Emile taught us how to fake that we were "working" when *Herr* Kamionka or any boss from another department came in our shop. For this purpose Emile gave each of us an old telephone to always keep on the bench in a half-disassembled state and a screwdriver to take in our hands ready to "work," when we would hear somebody climbing the high, steep, and squeaky stairs leading to our shop. The shop was located

on a platform built on one end inside a tall building under the high roof of a large machine tool shop called *Werkstatt* in German.

Herr Kamionka liked his workers to look neat and clean and he appreciated that Bruno and I were always well shaved, had neatly combed hair, and wore clean white shirts under our Air Force uniforms. When the factory received shoes for the workers, he gave us the first two pairs, because ours were worn out from walking on the road to and from the factory, which was more than a mile-and-a-half from our camp.

The old German soldier who accompanied the column of Italian prisoners of war from the camp to the factory also liked us. Actually, he liked the four of us, Bruno and me, Benito and his friend Nemo. We were always ready at five-thirty in the morning at the head of the column. We marched at a swift pace often singing Italian folk songs. We would set the pace for the rest of the Italian prisoners of war who were behind us and were not always as tidy and in such a good mood as the four of us were.

Benito and Nemo, whom everybody jokingly called by the nickname "*Frattelini*"[7] because they were always together in the factory and in the camp, were also lucky to work together as electricians helping one German electrician in his work. So, compared to the other Italian prisoners of war, the four of us had easy work that didn't make us tired. Our friend Pierin Panzeri was not as lucky. From the second day of heavy work unloading the coal from the railroad platforms he was tired and could not keep the pace with us in the first row. And he left us to march in the last rows of the column, where were all those who were dragging their feet from being tired on the job, undernourished, or in poor health.

When we arrived in the camp in Laband, the first thing I did was to hide my camera, so no one could find it easily. I fastened it under one board of my lower bunk bed. Bruno was sleeping on the second level and Pierin on the lower level of the bed next to mine. One day, in the winter of 1943-44, I took my camera to the factory and asked Rufin to take a picture of Bruno and me[8] sitting at the bench in our workshop. Rufin admired my camera and asked me if I would like to exchange it for bread and other foodstuff that he would bring me in small amounts every week. I was more than happy to accept his proposal for such an exchange. Rufin Swizsi and his wife Lidia lived in the apartment in the small Polish town of Michalkowice.[9] He traveled every day on the streetcar to work and was able to bring from home any food that his wife could find on the market.

The food given to us in the camp was not sufficient for the young men. The meager daily diet consisted of *ersatz* coffee in the morning, watery soup made from huge turnips and lightly thickened with some kind of flour twice a day, and a piece of dark bread in the evening. On Sunday at lunch we received one boiled potato, a slice of boiled salami, a pat of margarine, and one tablespoon of sugar. It was adding a little to the weekly diet. Also, because all three of us, Bruno, Pierin, and I didn't smoke, we exchanged the three cigarettes that we received weekly with our smoking fellow prisoners for a slice of bread. We all lost a lot of weight, but Pierin, who was working hard outside in the cold weather, was exhausted, pale, and depressed. I was glad that I could in some small way help him with the food that Rufin was bringing me in exchange for my camera.

Usually Rufin brought me bread, sliced boiled salami, or *wurst* sausages, or lard. I was dividing all the food in equal parts for the three of us. Although the quantities of the

extra food that each of us had were small, it added some substance to our diet. But most of all it lifted our spirits for several weeks. We ate it in the evening, sitting not at the table where the others could see us, but hiding on Pierin's bed and mine, so no one would report on us to our interpreter Cosso that we were getting food from somewhere or from somebody. It was known that he used his position with the Germans to his advantage and we were afraid that he would blackmail us to get him part of the food; even worse, he could get Rufin and us in trouble by reporting us to the *Lagerfuhrer*.

Cosso was the interpreter for the German *Lagerfuhrer*, and he had spies in all the barracks. Although in our camp there was an Italian warrant officer, who was officially supposed to be in charge of the enlisted men, Cosso behaved as if he was the boss in our camp. The ability to communicate in German with the *Lagerfuhrer* and the guards was giving him the advantage of manipulating facts and orders, and giving him power over other Italian prisoners of war who could not speak German. It was known that Cosso often abused men verbally and physically for trivial reasons. Witnesses recounted that once when the warrant officer disagreed with Cosso about something and insisted that it be done his way, Cosso did not hesitate to hit his superior in rank in the face with the fist.

The *Lagerfuhrer* was very demanding that the floors in the barracks be cleaned and in the winter the slag from the burned coal was removed from the heating stove every evening. On a rotation basis, two men from each room had to do this job after they returned from twelve hours of work in the factory. One evening this was not done in our barrack, because the two slackers decided that they could get away with it. Well, the German guard who came to check it decided to give us a lesson. He ordered all of us to get out of the barrack; then he pulled all the slag from the stove and dropped it on the floor, and then brought two buckets of water and splashed it all over the slag, making a big mess on the floor. After that he ordered the two culprits to clean it. We all had to stay outside in the cold until the slackers had finished cleaning the floor. Since that night we certainly made sure that this chore was done promptly also because we needed that the stove was working well.

During cold weather there were many things that the men would do around the warm stove. Some would just sit close to it and warm themselves after a long day working outside in the cold. Others would place their socks near it to dry quicker than on the edge of their bunk bed. And there were those who would boil water or heat the remnants of the morning ersatz coffee. One young man, whom somebody gave the nickname Crostino[10] and it stuck to him, used the stove on Sundays. He used to collect from everybody the skins from boiled potatoes that we got for lunch every Sunday. He pressed the skins together to make himself a flat pancake, which he roasted well on the surface of the stove, making a crispy crust on both sides. Then he would eat it slowly savoring it as a fine delicacy.

After the supplements of food brought by Rufin in exchange for my camera came to a halt, we returned to the meager diet of prisoners of war. Bruno and I had a sheltered place of work and twelve hours in the warm telephone workshop, and occasional repairs of cables outside did not drain our physical strength. It was a different situation with our friend Pierin. He was returning exhausted after twelve hours of unloading coal in the cold weather. I began to think that to keep him from completely losing his strength and seeing him become ill, maybe the time had come to exchange the wedding ring, which

Pierin gave me as a present for food. I took my military jacket and unbuttoned the breast pocket where I kept the ring fastened with the safety pin. It was not there. I was in a panic. Nobody else beside Pierin knew that I had the ring and where I kept it. Only a few weeks back I had checked my pocket and the ring was there.

At night I kept my jacket well folded under my pillow. The only time it was unattended for a short time was when I was washing myself in the morning or taking a shower. But there was always either Pierin or Bruno near our bunk beds. When I told Pierin about the disappearance of the ring, he seemed to be as surprised about it as I was. But he didn't fuss much about it, he just told me, "If it is gone, you cannot do anything about it." It remained a mystery for a long time for me, how that ring could have disappeared. Several years later I figured out that since no one else knew that I had it and where I kept it, no one else could have taken it but my friend Pierin. Well, it was his present after all and he probably found a way to exchange it for food.

One evening when there were several men around the stove, I also came there for some reason, which I don't remember. I vaguely recall that either I knocked something off the stove, or did something else wrong. The fact was that the hungry men's tempers were always on edge and I just happened to be near the wrong man at the wrong time; he became mad at me and I answered him back. Well, I got myself in trouble. There was a big and loud fight, table and benches were knocked down on the floor, and there was lots of screaming and noise. Finally Bruno and Benito together with some others pulled us apart and led us to our bunk beds.

I sat on the edge of my bed breathing heavily and trying to catch my breath. I saw my dear friend Pierin, lying completely relaxed on his bed in front of me. He slowly opened his eyes, looked at me, and in an innocent tone of voice asked me, "What happened?"

I couldn't believe that with all that noise that we made during the fight Pierin didn't hear anything and I answered him with a question, "Didn't you hear that I was screaming? Didn't you hear that a big fight was going on?"

"No, I was sleeping," he replied with calm indifference, as if it had happened not to me, Giulio, his friend, but to some stranger about whom he didn't care. And he turned on his side and closed his eyes again without bothering even to ask me if I was hurt, or the reason for the fight, or with whom I had a fight. I was very disappointed that he, whom I had considered for a long time to be my best friend, not only didn't come to help me out, but also was completely insensitive about what happened to me. Although I tried in my mind to find some explanation for his strange behavior, this incident put a deep crack in my friendship with Pierin.

One morning in the early spring of 1944 when we were forming a column to walk to the *Presswerke*, the German guard read several names from each barrack from the list and ordered them to remain in the camp without explaining why. Pierin was among those who were called. Before leaving for work, Bruno and I saluted him, "*Ciao*! We will see you later!" We guessed that maybe they had some job to do in the camp. But when we returned in the evening from work, we found out that all those men were transferred to another camp and after that we didn't hear anything about what happened to our friend Pierin.

The warm days of spring lifted the spirits of the young Italian men in the camp. Every Sunday afternoon they were gathering near the gate behind the barbwire fence

facing the road and were singing Italian songs. One of them played guitar and all who wan¬ted to join them would sing. One of the most popular songs that became the trademark of the Italians was, "*T'aspetto bella sotto il monumento con una rosa in mano.*"[11] The passersby would stop and listen. After several weeks it became so popular that a small crowd was gathering to listen and clapping their hands in approval.

The English prisoners of war didn't work at the *Presswerke;* in fact, I think they didn't work at all. The English section of the *Lager* Laband was well isolated from the other sections with several layers of barbwire and a wide strip of land. They often received Red Cross food packages and looked in much better health than our Italian men. And there was almost no communication between them and the Italian prisoners of war.

Then there was a large section of the camp for Soviet prisoners of war. They were treated by the Germans as the lowest kind of war prisoners. Their rations of food were even smaller than ours. I remember that after a lunch was distributed to our Italian prisoners at twelve o'clock in the courtyard of the *Presswerke*, the Soviet prisoners of war would come and scrape their hands in the soup bin and clean up whatever remained attached to its walls. The majority of them worked on the heaviest types of jobs, either outside loading and unloading coal and other heavy items in the railroad cars, or inside the factory shoveling coal into the smelting furnaces of a building called Ida Hot. Most of them had been in captivity since 1941, and their Soviet Army uniforms and shoes were all worn out. They were bandaging rags over their shoes to protect themselves from the cold.

I remember one tragic incident that happened to three Soviet prisoners of war in the winter of 1943-44. These men were working at the railroad yard and cut a piece of the heavy rubber hose connecting the railroad cars to the brake system. They were caught and to try to justify their action said that they wanted to use the rubber to put soles on their shoes. But their excuses didn't work and they were accused of being saboteurs.

To give a lesson to the others, the Germans hanged them right in the *Presswerke* Laband yard and kept them hanging for three days so all could see the consequences of sabotage. When this happened, Bruno and I considered ourselves lucky that we were not caught when we took a couple of old airplane valves lying on the floor of the *Werkstatt*. Inside the valves were some nickel parts, which we removed; on a small lathe and drilling machine in the telephone workshop we made ourselves rings with our prisoner of war numbers inscribed on them.

On the floor of *Werkstatt* we also found some bolts and took one of them. We sawed it in pieces and were experimenting with shaping them on the lathe to make something—I don't even remember what. But I remember that *Il Baffone,*[12] one of our Italian men whom we had given this name because he had a big mustache similar Stalin's, told us that his boss Sova had searched desperately for that bolt and finally ordered him to make a new one when it could not be found.

"Can you imagine," I told Bruno, "what could have happened to us if somebody saw us taking that bolt?"

Talking about *Werkstatt* I remember that it had all kinds of special machines: lathes, milling machines, boring machines, welding equipment, and then there were the workbenches with vises and all kinds of hand tools. Everywhere were piles of various

metals, from aluminum, copper, and steel rods to blocks of iron, steel, and all kinds of special metal alloys.

The Master of the *Werkstatt*, *Herr* Sova, didn't pay much attention to keeping the hall neat. But he was a skilled master of all metal trades. Although his poor eyesight did not allow him to do the job himself anymore, he was very good in guiding the workers step-by-step in the production of custom-made parts. His thick eyeglasses in a dark heavy round frame made him resemble a real owl, which his name Sova meant in Polish. He was a tall and bony man, but the workers soon discovered that his size didn't matter because he was a good-natured person and they were not afraid of him.

Only men worked in the *Werkstatt* and they were of several nationalities, but the majority was Polish from the surrounding towns and Italian prisoners of war. They were all skilled workers who knew how to operate more than one machine. Their job was to custom-make from a block of metal an exact copy of the original part with the precision that would allow the new part to work as a substitute for the damaged part of any kind of machinery or any kind of weapon.

The men in the *Werkstatt* often made jokes on behalf of Master Sova and made him upset; they knew that he would scream and curse them, but would never really punish them. I remember one prank that *Il Baffone* played on his boss. Because of the noise from many machines in the *Werkstatt*, it was hard to hear somebody unless he was very close to you. The lathe on which *Il Baffone* worked was not far from the telephone booth, which Sova often used to communicate with other departments.

Well, one day when Sova was talking on the telephone, *Il Baffone* rolled a heavy metal part close to the booth door and then continued to work on his lathe like nothing happened. When Sova tried to get out of the booth, he could not open the door. *Il Baffone* could hear his boss banging on the door, but he continued to work. Everybody in the *Werkstatt* had fun observing as their master was banging on the door trying to get out.

Finally, Sova called someone from another department on the telephone to come and help him to get out. *Il Baffone*, who was the closest there, was ordered to remove the heavy metal piece.

The tall and skinny Sova, with the heavy dark rim glasses, got out of the booth, all red in the face, his eyes almost coming out of their sockets, making him look even more like an owl. He screamed and swore at *Il Baffone,* accusing him of faking that he could not hear his bangs.

Il Baffone justified himself by touching his ears with his hands, explaining that the noise in the *Werkstatt* did not allow him to hear his boss. But he didn't deny that it was he who put that heavy metal piece near the telephone booth door and apologized for not seeing that his boss was inside.

Il Baffone knew that Sova appreciated him as a very good lathe operator on whom he could count to make the most complicated piece of work. Therefore, he wasn't really afraid of his boss's screaming at him. But it was worth it to see that scene and everybody in the *Werkstatt* had fun with his prank.

Well, Master Sova also knew that it was a joke at his expense and he screamed and cursed but at the end he accepted the apology; *Il Baffone* was a very skillful worker and the master needed him more than anybody else in the shop and he could not afford to punish him.

One day in the beginning of summer 1944 a young girl from the drafting office came to our telephone workshop to ask Emile about a tool that she needed to be repaired for her work. Only the three of us, Emile, Bruno and I, were there. Although she and Emile talked in German, they knew from their accents that both of them were foreigners. Of course, they asked each other the usual question, “Where are you from?” She answered that she was from the Soviet Union, commonly referred to as Russia. And Emile told her that he was French and presented Bruno and me as Italians. So we all got acquainted about our nationalities and learned each other’s first names. Her name was real pretty Russian name, Olga.

It was the first Russian that I met in person and I became very curious because I could ask many questions about the life in Russia. From her first-hand experience she could tell me if anything was true in all those articles that I read in the fascist newspapers. I suspected that most of the writings were just fascist propaganda against communism.

Well, I could not speak German and could ask only a few short questions in French, and Emile translated them in German. Then Emile translated her answers in German to me in French. It was an awkward way of communicating. However, she told us that her mother was a teacher of French and her father was also a teacher. This made me think that it was an educated family that could tell about real life in Russia under the communist regime. Meanwhile, Emile assigned me to repair her drafting tool and I told her to return to pick it up the next day. And when she was leaving, she said to all of us in French, “*Au revoir*.”

She had to return twice until the tool was working well. When she returned, she asked Emile if she could sometime come to the workshop to practice conversation in French, which she said she was studying with her mother. And Emile, who saw my interest in talking to her, referred her to me for French tutoring.

That’s how my curiosity about the life in the Soviet Union led me to meet this Russian girl, and later when our status as prisoners of war had been changed to foreign workers, to also meet her family.

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1. Town in southwestern Italy.
2. Damned Italian man [in German].
3. Italian Military Corps especially trained and equipped for the mountain warfare.
4. Italian popular song “We would get married in May, with many roses, with many roses...”
5. A small town on former Polish territory annexed by Germany in 1939.
6. Northwestern region of Poland annexed by Germany during World War II.
7. The Little Brothers - in Italian.
8. From the preserved photograph.
9. A small town near the town of Katowitz, both annexed to Germany in 1939.
10. Derisive name derived from “crust.”
11. “I will be waiting for you, the pretty one, near the monument with a rose in my hand...”
12. “Big Mustache”, as Stalin was called [in Italian].

Chapter 10

It Is Wonderful To Be In Love

By Olga Gladky Verro

One Sunday when Giulio and I returned from our afternoon walk, my mother told me that *Frau* Maria had come twice to see if I was home. “She asked me to tell you that she is waiting for you,” said my mother, “that you promised her to come this evening for dinner.”

“Yes, I know. I just came to tell you that I am going there.”

“Where have you been?” *Frau* Maria reproached me at the door. “Benito is already here.”

“Oh,” I replied all excited, “I had a wonderful time with Giulio! We have been together the whole afternoon!” *Frau* Maria was so preoccupied with her visitor that she told me that I could tell her all about it tomorrow on our way to work.

Benito was sitting on the chair and was surprised to see me. “*Ciao*, Benito,” I greeted him in Italian and jokingly tousled with fingers his neatly combed wavy black and shiny hair. Once lifted the hair stood up in bunches glued together by abundant oil dressing that made my fingers greasy and sticky. Benito looked so funny that both, *Frau* Maria and I couldn’t stop laughing. He felt embarrassed and quickly pulled a comb out of his pocket and began to rearrange his hairdo.

He didn’t dare to show me his disapproval and, seeing that it did put us both in a good mood, explained, “We Italians use heavy transformer oil to keep our hair in place. That’s all that we could find at the factory to use as a hairdressing.”

Frau Maria served the supper of boiled potatoes with a condiment of onions fried in margarine; for dessert she made some kind of a pudding and a cup of ersatz coffee. For those days it was a real treat, especially compared to the food the Italians got in the camp.

Benito knew a few German words and phrases and in communicating with us combined them with gestures and facial expressions. I was using some French words hoping that they sounded similar in Italian. *Frau* Maria resorted to gracious flirting, mimicry, and simple German expressions, most of which Benito could understand. Thus, in a primitive way we were able to keep some conversation going all the time.

After dinner, when *Frau* Maria was clearing the table, Benito—without saying a word—gave me a supplicating look and indicated with a finger that he wanted me to go home and leave him alone with her. I nodded in a sign of agreement and said, “*Frau* Maria, it is time for me to go home.” She tried to convince me to stay a little bit longer, but I decided that Benito had the right to have some time without a chaperone. To my surprise, *Frau* Maria told to a disappointed Benito that it was also time for him to leave.

“I am sorry,” I told Benito as we were walking down the stairs, “you should have patience with *Frau* Maria; she needs to know you better.” I don’t know if he understood my words, but my tone of voice was conveying the excuse for my friend’s action.

In the weeks that followed the Italians received the new *Lager-Ausweis*[1] with the 11 P.M.[2] turn-in time written by hand on the top of it.

I remember one unusual event when Giulio and his friend Bruno Zanobini were invited for a dinner in the home of their German coworker *Herr* Kramer. Giulio told me that they ate sausages, sauerkraut, potatoes, and finished the dinner with a cup of ersatz coffee. It was indeed very unusual, because most Germans didn't associate themselves with the Italians even after their status had changed to foreign workers. But, as Giulio told me, when they had the status of prisoners of war, *Herr* Kramer was the only one who shared half of his sandwich with Bruno and him when there were no other German workers in the shop.

Giulio became a regular visitor in my home on Sunday afternoons and I couldn't go anymore to be *Frau* Maria's chaperone for Benito's visits. But on the day when Giulio was invited to *Herr* Kramer I was free and came to see *Frau* Maria while Benito was there. Now she was relaxed with her admirer and I saw that she allowed him a few tender liberties in my presence that indicated they had reached a stage of intimacy which she hadn't told me about. She and Benito were in a good mood and were openly showing it.

"You are both very happy," I told Benito.

"Yes, we are," he replied and asked me, "Are you happy with Giulio? Did you make a serious commitment to each other?"

"I am happy," I answered, "I am very fond of him. I don't know yet how serious Giulio is about me. We never talk about the future, we are content to be together now."

"You should think about the future," replied Benito, like a wise older man giving advice to a young girl. "Giulio is a fine young man who could make you very happy. He is honest and fair with everybody. You can trust him." Then he reflected for a moment and added, "He knows how to do everything and he would take good care of you. I am sure that he would treat you like a queen."

"It is good to hear all these nice things about Giulio," I replied. "But I would not spoil the happiness that I have now by urging Giulio to make a commitment for the future, which neither of us can predict."

For a while *Frau* Maria and I had felt comfortable being alone with our men, and now most of the time we walked home from the factory in pairs at our own pace, *Frau* Maria with Benito and I with Giulio.

Now every Sunday afternoon Giulio stayed with us for lunch, or for supper, and after the meal we were going out either for a long walk or to the movies. It was a time that we were learning about each other, oblivious of the war that was going on and not thinking about tomorrow. We were living only in the present. It was enough for us to be together to feel happy. Each day was bringing us closer and closer to each other; we knew that we were in love but neither Giulio nor I had said to each other "I love you." It was at that time that Giulio began to call me in Italian *Mia piccola Lala* – "My little Lala," a name that expressed his feelings for me But I felt that Giulio had a very good reason for not rushing to declare in words his love for me and I didn't want to rush him until he was ready to tell.

On one Sunday we went walking in the park. It was a cold autumn evening and to keep us warm we walked arm-in-arm back and forth on a carpet of wet decaying leaves and grass. When I came home I discovered that I had lost my green necklace. On the

next day after work, I went with Giulio to look for it. There was very little chance of finding it in the windy weather that was blowing the leaves and piling them against the trunks of the trees. I made a secret wish, "If we find the necklace, it shall be a good omen that Giulio and I shall love each other and be together for a long, long time." To my surprise, we found it very quickly; it was just lying there waiting for us. I became exuberant with joy. Giulio couldn't figure out why I was so happy; after all, it was a very inexpensive necklace. But I didn't reveal my secret wish to him.

Sometime in September Giulio asked me to give him my picture and I went to the photo-atelier and made a photo without my eyeglasses. On the twentieth of September 1944 we exchanged our photos. I wrote on the back of my recently made picture: "Remember your little Lala."[3]

Giulio gave me his photo made in Turin when he was on a furlough from the Italian Air Force unit stationed in Greece. On the back of the photo he wrote: "To Lala, in memory of our great friendship."[4] On that picture he was so handsome, not skinny as he was now, and so elegant dressed in a well-tailored coat.

I showed the picture to *Frau* Maria, who commented, "Olga, he is so attractive! With a little bit of good food he will look like this again." Then she asked me, "Aren't you happy now that I sent you to meet him in the telephone workshop?"

"Yes," I confirmed. "If it wasn't for you, I would probably have never met him."

Then I showed her the inscription on the back of the photo and told her, "Look here, Giulio wrote to me to remember 'our great friendship.' But I am in love with him and he is not in love with me."

Frau Maria said with reassurance, "He is in love with you, too. But there must be something that prevents him from saying it. You should ask him what it is."

"No," I said, "I don't want to destroy the great happiness that we have. If he considers it to be a friendship, so be it. I prefer that he is honest with me, rather than deceiving me, or being forced to tell me something that he doesn't feel I should know."

Frau Maria said with the air of a woman experienced in the matters of men-women relationships, "I would never wait; I would take the initiative. I told you many times that a man needs encouragement from the woman. You are too timid with him. And you may regret it one day when it is too late."

Sometime in September 1944 the Allied bombers began daytime bombardments of the gasoline refineries of Haidelbreck,[5] that was not to far from Laband. We heard that those refineries were transforming coal into gasoline fuel.

At the *Presswerke* the air raid alarms would sound ahead of time before the air gradually filled with the ominous humming of a large number of Allied bombers. All workers from the *Presswerke* were directed to run for shelter in the nearby forest. Giulio and I would meet at the main door of the drafting office and he would take my hand and pull me to run faster.

In the forest people would disperse between the trees and bushes and listen with fear to the rumbling thunder of the explosions somewhere beyond the forest from very powerful bombs and probably from the explosion of the stored gasoline. No one knew if our factory would also be the target on that day.

Although I had experienced two years of shelling by the Soviet artillery in my hometown—but those were only shrapnel shells—I was overwhelmed with fear by the intensity and power of explosions from the Allies' bombardments. I would cling to Giulio,

hiding my head on his chest, and he would tenderly embrace my small body giving me the protection that I was seeking. For the first time our physical closeness during the time of danger provided a silent communion between our souls and bodies. And the feeling of Giulio's warmth and tenderness would overwhelm me.

When we would hear the sound of the returning bombers and the factory would signal the end of the air raid, Giulio would gently kiss me on the cheek and reassure me, "It's all over, my little girl. They are gone." As we would slowly walk back to the factory, he would hold my hand and by squeezing it occasionally would reassure me that there was no more danger.

After several air raids, which always had the same target of fuel refineries and gasoline depots in Haidelbreck, Giulio told me with confidence, "I think that the Allies will not bother to drop bombs on our insignificant factory. From my experience in the Legionary Air Force during the civil war in Spain[6] such bombardments are usually done on important targets. Therefore, we don't have to run in the forest as fast as we did during the first air raids. Let's imagine that this time is given to us as an outing in the forest and let's enjoy it by being together." And he was right. The Allies never bombarded *Presswerke Laband*.

As the autumn weather was becoming windy and chilly and the carpet of multicolored leaves in the forest was wet from the rains, during the air raids we would find a comfortable place to sit on a fallen tree trunk. Giulio would unbutton his double-breasted military coat and hold me tight by enveloping my small body in the warm heavy wool and keep my hands between the hot palms of his hands. We could feel our hearts beating and our lungs breathing and the feeling of tender affection and fondness would almost inebriate us. We knew that we were in love.

Our affectionate relationship didn't go unnoticed by Giulio's boss, the head of the *Presswerke Laband* Telephone Department, *Herr* Kamionka, who was also a Nazi Party boss of the *Presswerke Laband* factory. One late afternoon after work, when Giulio and I were walking through the factory gate, the guard stopped me and told me to go in the office to see *Herr* Kamionka.

Giulio and I looked at each other with surprise. He asked me, "What could he want from you? I will wait for you here."

After answering my greetings *Herr* Kamionka invited me very politely to sit down. In a fatherly, but strict tone of voice, he admonished me, "I was informed that one of the Italian young man who is working in the telephone workshop is courting you. As a *Volksdeutsche* you should not get involved with the Italians."

"*Herr* Kamionka," I replied quickly, "I am not a *Volksdeutsche*."

Surprised with my answer he asked, "Isn't *Herr* Igor Gladki your uncle?"

"Yes, he is," I answered and added, "My uncle is a *Volksdeutsche,* because his wife's father was German. My father, mother, and I are Ukrainians. We were transferred to the *Presswerke* as specialist foreign workers. Now the Italians also have the status of foreign workers. There are no restrictions for foreign workers on making friends with the other nationalities."

Herr Kamionka reflected for a few seconds and then suggested in a conciliatory way, "Well, as a relative of the *Volksdeutsche* it would be better if you find yourself a German young man and you could become a *Volksdeutsche* too."

"It is not so easy," I replied. "All the German young men are fighting the war and

many German women are waiting for them."

Herr Kamionka got up from his chair and I understood that it was the end of the audience and I got up too. But before I had a chance to salute him, he added, "I hope you will think seriously about this matter and ask the advice of your father and your uncle." Then he saluted me, "*Heil* Hitler!"

I answered, "*Auf Wiedersehen*!" and quickly left his office.

Giulio was waiting for me, anxious to find out what his boss wanted from me. When I told him about Kamionka's concern and his suggestion, Giulio became very upset and exclaimed, "Are you afraid of Kamionka? Who does he think he is to tell you whom you could or could not be friends with?! He knows that you have your father and mother who could tell you this." Then he paused for a moment and asked, "By the way, what do your parents say about me?"

"They both like you. They think that you are a fine young man. However, my father warned me not to become too serious about you because you are a soldier and when the war is over, it is expected that you will return home."

Giulio stopped and stood in front of me. Looking straight in my eyes he said, "As a father, he gave you the right advice. What are you going to do now? Will you stop seeing me?"

"Of course not!" I replied emphatically. "I am happy to be with you. Why should I stop seeing you? My father only gave me his advice. And Kamionka couldn't order me to stop seeing you when I told him that I am not a *Volksdeutsche*."

Giulio placed his hands on my cheeks and gave a long kiss on my lips, leaving me breathless. It was the first time that he kissed me on my lips and he did it with such fervor that I felt that he really cared for me. After this Giulio became more exuberant in showering me with affection.

By the time the snow fell on the ground, we couldn't make long walks anymore in the cold windy weather. Now Giulio was coming to see me in the evening several times a week. Most of the time he had supper with us and the four of us spoke in French for a while. Usually Giulio had many questions about our life under the communists' regime and my father was glad to educate him by telling him real life stories dating back to the years of the revolution and the civil war, and bringing him up-to-date until the time of war with Germany.

Giulio told us about the Spanish Civil War when he was a volunteer in the Legionary Air Force, who fought the communists. My father was very impressed to hear that Giulio was on the anti-communist side of the Spanish conflict. It immediately elevated my father's opinion about Giulio, because my father had very rigid standards about a person's political loyalties. For him there were only two kinds of people, the communists, whom he hated and whom he considered to be his enemies, or the anti-communists, whom he considered righteous persons with whom he could live in harmony.

When my parents would go to sleep in our room, Giulio and I stayed in the kitchen until quarter to eleven at night, just enough time for him to return to the camp before the curfew. We would sit close to each other and Giulio would embrace me and caress me gently and lovingly, once in a while kissing me. There were a few of those moments when we allowed ourselves to express our feelings freely, forgetting that we really were never alone; the two young Caucasian men who lived in the small room in our apartment

were coming in and out of the kitchen anytime they wanted without knocking. They would come to put their teakettle on the stove, to make a tea, and to wash their cups. Sometimes it seemed that they did this with the purpose of annoying us, but they had the right to use the kitchen and we could not complain about it.

Then one evening before Giulio arrived the Caucasian men made a big fuss with my mother and father, saying that they were very annoyed to see Giulio in our kitchen in the evening. One of them said, "We are offended that your daughter is dating a foreigner, an Italian man. Both of us are tall and handsome men and we are your compatriots. Why didn't she choose one of us?"

And the other one added, "We are available right here in the apartment and we could keep her company in the evening."

Both of them spoke Russian with such a heavy Caucasian accent that I wanted to tell them that to me they sounded more foreign than the Italian who spoke French with me. But my father didn't allow me to talk. He told me to go in our room and he and my mother persuaded the Caucasians that, since they had never showed an interest in me before, there was no reason for them to be offended.

One evening Giulio almost got in trouble for being a few minutes late in returning to the camp. The guard at the gate began to scream at him. From the guardroom Giulio heard on the radio the sound of the familiar tune: it was the famous aria from the opera "*Pescatori di Perle.*"[7] Giulio said quietly to the guard, "Sh-sh-sh..." and he began to sing softly along with the music. The guard stopped screaming and allowed Giulio to listen to the end of the aria. Then he waved his hand and told him to hurry to the barrack. Love of music saved Giulio from punishment for returning to the camp after the curfew time.

It was sometime at that time that I told Giulio what meaning I had attached to finding the necklace when I lost it during one of our first walks in the park. Giulio said, "I remember that you were so excited when you found it and believed that it was dear to you as some kind of a souvenir."

He embraced me and looking lovingly in my eyes added with emotion in his voice, "But now I am so happy to know that you made such a wish then. This means that you already loved me then and wanted me to love you and to be with you for a long time. And now I can see in your eyes that you love me. Nobody has looked at me like this before." And he tenderly kissed my eyes several times. And for the first time he told me what I had been waiting for so long to hear. First, he said it in French, "*Je t'aime.*" Then he said in Italian, "*Ti voglio bene*." And then he asked me to say it in Russian and repeated, "*Ya tyebya lyublyu*." But they all meant the same thing, "I love you."

On the twenty-second of December, 1944 we celebrated Giulio's birthday and as a surprise I invited his friend Bruno Zanobini to come and be with us for that occasion. My mother baked a simple cake and we had the ersatz coffee with sugar. I gave Giulio a gift, a long and narrow white scarf, which I crocheted from cotton yarn given to me by my aunt. Giulio tried it to see how it would look on him and we all laughed because it was so long that the ends were hanging below his knees. He wrapped it several times around his neck to make me happy that he could use it.

On that occasion Giulio gave me one of his photos that we made at the photo-automat and this time he wrote on the back of it: "*In un giorno felice, per un caro ricordo*" that meant "In one day of happiness, for a dear remembrance." And this expressed exactly the way we felt at that time; we were happy just being together. And I gave him

my photo made on the same day.

On the twenty-fifth of December 1944, on German Christmas, we were invited to my uncle Igor's home in the afternoon for a dinner. But the festivities were somber and all we talked about was that the eastern front was moving fast toward the German territory. We all were concerned about what we would do when the Red Army came closer to Laband.

My aunt was pregnant and they expected the baby to be born sometime at the end of January. My uncle was insisting that his wife, children, and the old mother move to the western part of Germany to stay with the family of one of their good friends who were also *Volksdeutsche*. My aunt was accusing my uncle of wanting to get rid of her and the family and was refusing to leave without him. My uncle was trying to explain that he could not go with them because at that time only the families were allowed to leave; the men had to remain to work at the factory. But my aunt stubbornly insisted that he could find a way if he wanted. We went home all upset about the bad news and with an unpleasant feeling that my uncle and his wife had problems in their marriage.

We invited Giulio to be with us on Christmas evening. As we had tea and cake that my mother baked, our conversation was centered again on the danger we were facing if the Red Army continued to push Germans on their own soil.

On the last day of December, 1944 Giulio and I walked all the way to the Laband railroad station to buy a flask of beer at the tavern. It was a very cold evening and to keep ourselves warm we walked fast, making the dry snow squeak under our feet. The frost was biting my cheeks and Giulio was complimenting me that they were like the two ripe red apples and he stopped right in the middle of the road and kissed them.

That evening, on the eve of the New Year, Giulio participated in our old Ukrainian tradition of foretelling what the New Year would bring to each of us. In the candlelight we watched the shadow on the wall from a burning paper bunched and placed on a dish and guessed what that shadow resembled. My mother was worried about the Soviet Army, which was already in the nearby Polish territory, and she was seeing in the shadows a long procession of people carrying bags on their backs. This was confirming her conviction about the bad times ahead when she would be escaping with the others from the advancing Red Army. I saw the long train with smoke coming from the engine's chimney and my mother interpreted it for me that I would travel in the New Year. Giulio, who didn't believe in this nonsense, was making fun by telling us that he was seeing all kinds of strange things in the shadows.

Then Giulio and I ran out in the street to throw away an old dish, another tradition that meant to throw away all the troubles of the past year. That night there was no restriction of eleven o'clock to be back at the camp. At one second after midnight on January 1, 1945 we celebrated our very first New Year with Giulio. We toasted with watered down beer that the German tavern-keeper was selling to the foreigners. On that occasion we all embraced each other wishing, "Happy New Year." And for the first time Giulio kissed me in the presence of my parents, wishing that we could celebrate many New Years together in the future.

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1. From the preserved camp pass card.
2. *Sperrstunde 21:00 Uhr* [in German].
3. From the inscription on the photo.

4. From the inscription on the photo.
5. Not sure of the exact name of that town.
6. See the chapter “Volunteer in the Italian Air Force.”
7. “*Les Pecheurs de Perles*,” by Georges Bizet.

Chapter 11

The Soviet Army Is Advancing

By Olga Gladky Verro

During the first three weeks of January, 1945 every day was bringing bad news from the front line, mostly by word of mouth from the German civilians who were packing the trains going west. Newspapers were not revealing the truth about what was going on either on the eastern or on the western fronts. In the *Presswerke Laband* work was going on as usual. The German workers who were used to discipline and to obeying orders, were all coming to work and the foreign workers had no choice but to come to work. The Soviet prisoners of war were led to work by heavy armed guards.

The nighttime alarms were becoming routine. Giulio was coming now every evening to stay with me and we would run in the cellar together with the others to hide until there was an all-clear signal. We would stand somewhere in a dark corner and Giulio would embrace me and hold me close, kissing me gently once in a while. We found out later that the alarms were just for training the population for the real ones to be expected in the future.

Many Germans and *Volksdeutsche* were sending their families further into the interior of Germany. But my uncle Igor was not able to convince his wife to evacuate before all trains were declared to be reserved for the military and no civilians could board them anymore. The news was now very grim.

By the middle of January, by foot and with all kinds of hand-pulled sleds and carts, whole families, many with children, and many single men were traveling through Laband. They were not only Germans and *Volksdeutsche*, but also Russians, Ukrainians, Estonians, Byelorussians, Latvians, Lithuanians, Polish, and other nationalities that were escaping from being captured by the Soviets. They were telling stories that in all places occupied by the Red Army all Soviet citizens, that included all nationalities, were ordered to register at once with the NKVD and all men were immediately taken by the NKVD agents and sent somewhere, probably to fight on the front line, or maybe directly to concentration camps in Siberia.

Sometime after the middle of January we had a family council with my uncle Igor in our apartment and we decided to follow the other families and to leave Laband before the Red Army captured the town. Igor was uncertain how he could do it with his big family and wife, who was due to deliver their baby at any time now. He kept his options open, although it was most likely that his family would not be able to leave.

I told Giulio about our decision to leave Laband by foot and that we needed a sled to carry some of our belongings. Giulio took it upon himself to make a sled at the *Presswerke*. He made the parts in the *Werkstatt,* where he could find any kind of metal lying around. He brought the separate parts piece by piece tied to his body under his large military coat, and then he assembled the sled in our apartment.

Toward the end of the third week of January an order came mobilizing all able-

bodied German men for the civil defense of the *Presswerke* and the town of Laband. Giulio told me that three German men, Kochalla, Kramer, and Kiklas, had left as part of a civil defense unit from his telephone workshop.

The stream of the refugees coming through the town continued, but there was no way to find out exactly how far from Laband the Red Army was. However, the general perception was that it was very close. The *Presswerke* continued to operate although there was an atmosphere of uncertainty about how long it could continue with so many German men mobilized into civil defense and only the foreign workers doing the work.

My mother and I had begun to pack our clothing and food to be ready at any moment to take off. Then my mother had another strong attack of sciatica; she couldn't walk and had to stay in bed with a hot water bottle for pain relief. My aunt Antonina Yuliyevna was ready to give birth at any moment. The weather continued to be very cold and windy. Nobody in my uncle Igor's family, pregnant wife, old mother, or two small children, could go out in such bad weather on the road to walk; in our family my mother was in no condition to be moved.

My mother and I decided that we would remain in Laband. We told my father that as a man he was in immediate danger. We were convinced that he couldn't survive if he was sent to the front, or to a concentration camp in Siberia. We told him that he had no choice but to save himself and go west when the time came. After all, it would not be the first time that we were separated and found each other again. At least we could hope that he would remain alive.

I told Giulio about my mother's and my decision to remain in Laband and he was happy to hear it. He commented, "It will give us more time to be together." But he didn't believe the stories that the Soviets grabbed all men and made them disappear. However, he told me that when the time came for my father to leave, he would come and stay with my mother and me.

As the Soviet Army was coming closer and closer to Laband, the German men in the local civil defense unit took positions with machine guns on the roofs of the *Presswerke Laband* buildings and with rifles on the perimeter of the factory, on the railroad station, along the canal, and in some other strategic points in town. By the twenty-first of January, 1945 all work at the *Presswerke Laband* had stopped and no foreign workers were admitted. Giulio came to our apartment and told us that the English and Russian prisoners of war were kept heavily guarded in the barracks behind the barbwire fence in the *Kriegsgefangene*[1] camp. But the foreign workers were allowed to go in and out of the camp without restrictions.

By this time everybody knew that the end of the German occupation of that part of Poland was imminent. Some foreign workers who lived in the camp or in the workers' hamlet were Soviet sympathizers, especially the French, including Emile from the telephone workshop, and they were waiting to be liberated by the Soviet Army from the Germans.

The Polish, who though glad to see the Germans being chased from the Polish territory, were not very happy to see the Soviets take their place. But the Soviet citizens were terrified about the arrival of the Soviet Army. They knew what to expect as a punishment for just being in Germany during the war. Therefore, men and many families were ready to leave Laband and walk west to escape being captured by the NKVD.

My mother and I insisted that my father leave without us, since my mother was

not improving and could not walk due to her attack of sciatica. In my uncle Igor's family the situation was more complicated. On the twenty-second of January, 1945 my aunt gave birth to a healthy baby boy, whom my uncle registered in the Laband Townhall as Walter Gladki.

That day, toward late afternoon the bad news had spread like wildfire among the population of Laband: "The Soviet Army has captured several towns east of Laband." Uncle Igor came to talk to my father, asking him what he intended to do. The two young Caucasian men who lived in the small room in our apartment came home and frantically rushed to pack their belongings. When they were ready to leave, they came in the kitchen to say good-bye to us.

"We are leaving right away to make some kilometers before the darkness of the night," one said.

And the other warned my father and uncle Igor who was there, "If you don't want to be captured by the Soviets, you better hurry and leave. In two to three days they will be in Laband. We have the information from very reliable sources." And they left in a hurry.

My father looked at his brother and said, "Little brother, it's time to go! If you join me, we will leave early tomorrow morning."

"It is easy for you to say," answered Igor. "Your wife and daughter understand what danger awaits you if you are captured by the Soviets. I cannot convince my wife that I have no other choice... She doesn't understand that if I remain here she will lose me anyway. Before, I was not able to convince her to evacuate with the children. Now, with the newborn baby she has to stay behind only because she was so stubborn, refusing to leave without me."

"Well, if you decide to go, be here before five o'clock in the morning," said my father, "so we can slip out of town before dawn." As Uncle Igor was leaving, he didn't say "Good-bye", but just confirmed the time of the departure, "Five o'clock tomorrow morning."

My mother prepared a small backpack for my father with warm underwear and socks, a few shirts, and one extra pair of slacks. He didn't want to have much to carry. She also packed him the bread and lard that we had.

When Giulio came late in the afternoon, I told him that my father and his brother would be leaving early tomorrow morning.

Giulio could not understand how my father could leave his wife and daughter and run away alone. And when he heard that my uncle was joining him, leaving his wife, newborn son, two small children, and the old Babushka behind, he was appalled.

"Giulio," I tried to reason with him, "it is a matter of survival. It happened to us once before when the Soviets recaptured our hometown; both my father and uncle Igor left and we and his family remained home. When the danger had passed, they returned. And now, if they remain here, we will lose them anyway. If they can keep from being captured by the Soviets, we can hope that they will remain alive and free and maybe one day can reunite with us."

Giulio stayed most of the afternoon and he promised that after my father left he would come and stay with my mother and me. He inspected the small room left in disarray by the two Caucasian men and concluded that all it needed was a good cleaning. Then he asked my mother and me if we would agree that his friend Bruno

could also come to stay with us. We told him that it was even better if both of them stayed. And Giulio went to the camp to talk it over with Bruno. When Giulio came in the evening, he told us the good news, “Bruno agreed to stay with me in your apartment.”

My father was pleased to hear that two men would be staying with us. By this time he knew Giulio better and liked him. And he had also met Bruno, who was not a stranger to him. I think that knowing we would not be alone reassured him somewhat. But he was very nervous and was smoking one cigarette after another; my mother didn’t dare to send him on the staircase to smoke, as she usually did before saying that the smoke was giving her a headache. I asked my father to give me a cigarette, believing I would impress Giulio by learning to smoke. My father handed me a cigarette and I somewhat awkwardly put it between my lips. My father was ready to light it for me when I saw Giulio looking at me reproachfully; then said sternly, “Lala, don’t you start this bad habit!”

“I thought that you would like to see me as an emancipated woman,” I justified myself and I returned the cigarette to my father.

“No, I like you as you are,” answered Giulio, pleased that I had obeyed his wish.

My father asked Giulio to write his Italian address in his small notebook where there were the addresses of Zoya Litvinova in Germany and of Monsieur Demey in France. “Maybe among the three of these addresses we can find each other,” said my father with hope in his voice.

Giulio wrote his Italian address and giving it to my father said, “After the war ends, write to me and I will write to you where Lala and your wife are and what has happened to them.”

That evening Giulio left early. My father and Giulio said “Good-bye” to each other, first by shaking their hands and then by spontaneously embracing each other.

My father said to Giulio, “Take care of Lyalya. Cherish and protect her.”

Giulio promised him, “Don’t you worry, I shall take care of both of them.” And before going back to the camp he wished my father a good journey.

When Giulio kissed me at the door, he said to me with reassurance, “Don’t you worry, I will be here early in the morning. Bruno will come the day after tomorrow. He wants to spend one day more with his girlfriend Rosette.”

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1. Prisoners of war camp [in German].

Chapter 12

Giulio Comes to Stay With Us

By Olga Gladky Verro

On January 22, 1945 my father and uncle Igor left Laband before dawn. Knowing that our chances of seeing each other again were very improbable, we embraced in tears and kissed them and said good-bye like they were leaving us forever. Uncle Igor asked us to give some emotional support to his wife during the first days, which would be hard for her after he was gone. From the open door I watched through the tears in my eyes as they walked down the stairs. When I closed the door, my mother was standing in the middle of the kitchen crying. We embraced each other and stood consoling each other. Finally, my mother said, “We made the right decision to tell your father to go—at least he has a chance to survive.”

Early in the morning, Giulio came from the camp as he had promised. He brought his military backpack containing all his possessions. He dropped it in the middle of the kitchen floor, embraced me, and simply said, “Lala, I am here to stay.”

After having our first breakfast together, Giulio and I began get the small room ready for him and for Bruno. Right away Giulio showed his experience in doing household chores by taking the initiative in what needed to be done to clean the room thoroughly and make it look neat and comfortable. He allowed me only to help him in finding all he needed to do the job: the broom, the rags, and a pail for water. “This is the room where Bruno and I will be living,” he said. “You don’t have to clean it for us.”

The first thing he did was to open the window saying, “Let the fresh air come in.” My mother complained immediately about the cold air and we had to close both doors, the one to the kitchen and the other to the room. Then, from the open window Giulio shook vigorously and fluffed up the straw-filled pillows and mattresses and put them across the windowsill to freshen up. Meanwhile he cleaned the wooden bed frames with the wet rag, swept and washed the floor, and allowed me to clean the table and chairs. Finally, he made up his bed by using one of his military blankets as a bed sheet and covering it with another wool blanket. Bruno’s bed he left undone until he brought his own blankets. Giulio accepted my help only to do the minor chores. And I remembered what Benito told me, "Giulio knows how to do everything and he will take good care of you... He will treat you like a queen.”

My mother, with her sciatica pain, was complaining that we had left the window open for too long, allowing the whole apartment to become cold. She was sitting near the kitchen window watching outside and was reporting to us what was happening on our street.

The families that lived in the other apartments were leaving the hamlet in a panic. If the news had been about the spread of a pestilence epidemic, it wouldn’t have provoked such an exodus, as did the news about the imminent arrival of the Soviet Army. Men, women, and children were carrying their few belongings in bags either on their

backs or on sleds or carts, if they were fortunate to have them. They were hurriedly walking on the slippery road covered with packed snow.

Once in a while my mother would recognize somebody and call me to the window, “Look, look, Lyalya, they are also leaving and are taking their children in this cold weather. It looks like we will be among the few to remain here.”

That morning our neighbor, the woman of the *Volksdeutsche* couple who lived in the apartment opposite our door on the same landing, came to talk to my mother. She asked if we had decided not to leave and would remain in our apartment.

“As you can see,” answered my mother, “I cannot walk. My husband and his brother left very early this morning. Lyalya’s friends, the two Italian young men, will stay with us.”

“We are leaving now,” said our neighbor, “but we don’t know how far we will be able to go in this weather. Maybe we will have to come back. Could you watch our apartment? Here are the keys to it and to our cellar. If we don’t return before the Soviets come, take everything that we have left and use it for you. We don’t want it to be looted.” She left in a hurry, wishing us good luck, and we wished her and her husband a safe journey.

After lunch Giulio and I went to see my aunt Antonina Yulyevna and the children. This was her second day after childbirth and she was already sitting up in the chair holding her newborn baby boy. Nanochka and Fredik were helping her and Babushka with the chores. Giulio told her that if they needed help with something they could not do by themselves, he would gladly help them. I was surprised to see the tenderness with which Giulio admired the little baby when he took him in his arms and how affectionate he was with Fredik and Nanochka. On our way home he told me that from the time he was a small boy he had liked babies and small children and loved to play with his little cousins.

My aunt complained to us that her husband had left her alone to take care of the children. “Your uncle is a coward,” she said to me with resentment. “It is your father who convinced him that if they remained here their lives would be in danger. Oh! His arguments were very persuasive. Igor recited them all to me yesterday when he returned from your home.” And my aunt repeated them with bitterness in her voice, “He said that if they were drafted in the Soviet Army, they would die on the front line. If they were taken as traitors to the Motherland, they either would be shot or deported to perish in the NKVD concentration camps.”

Then she explained how she tried to argue with her husband, “I told Igor that maybe it could be true for his brother, who was Ukrainian, but since we are the *Volksdeutsche*, the Soviets would not draft him in the Red Army. And, if they would deport us back to the Soviet Union, so be it. At least we would be deported together as a whole family and would accept our destiny together.” I translated to Giulio all that she said and he agreed with her.

When we were returning to our apartment, Giulio said to me, “I cannot believe that your uncle could just walk away from his wife and children.”

I answered him with the question, “Do you think that it would have been better if the Soviets had taken him away from the family? At least now he might have a chance to be alive and maybe one day to reunite with them.”

Giulio disagreed with me, unconvinced by my argument. “I think that those

justifications are based only on rumors. We will see what will happen when the Soviets come."

Later that afternoon Antonina Yulyevna came to ask me if I could accompany her to Laband's town hall because she didn't speak German well and she wanted me to help her change the name of the baby from Walter to Igor.

"Why do you want to change his name?" I asked her.

"It is a German name and if we are deported to the Soviet Union, it would mark the boy as German for all his life. Don't you remember what they did to all my brothers? They all disappeared one by one only because they had German names."

We went to the town hall and found only two clerks, who decided that there was no harm in changing the name to Igor on the birth certificate registered only yesterday, and they issued her a new certificate.

Then I went across the street to see what happened to *Frau* Maria. Her apartment was empty and already ransacked. I couldn't find anything to take as a souvenir. "She must have been in an awful hurry to leave, I thought, because she didn't even come to say good-bye to me. Probably she left with somebody during the night."

Toward the evening the exodus from the hamlet seemed to stop, but now those who remained began to search in the abandoned apartments and to loot anything that was left in them. My mother told us to switch on the lights in our neighbor's kitchen to make it appear that it was not abandoned. We could hear late into the night the voices of people outside and could see from the windows the shadows carrying bundles on their backs. We left the light on all night in the kitchens of both apartments and did not go to sleep until very late.

We were expecting that the next morning Bruno would leave the camp and join Giulio to stay with us in our apartment.

Chapter 13

Chance, Destiny, Or the Will Of God

By Olga Gladky Verro
Also as Remembered by Giulio Verro

On January 24, 1945 we were awakened very early by the noise of sleds and carts and loud voices on our street. People were rushing in the search for loot, in small groups, as that was safer than venturing out alone. My mother was watching them from the kitchen window and commenting in French, "*Ils vont, ils vont. Ou ils vont*?"[1]

Only yesterday morning Giulio came to stay with my mother and me. This morning we were also expecting his friend Bruno Zanobini to join Giulio in living in a small room in our apartment.[2] Toward nine o'clock in the morning Giulio began to worry because his friend had not arrived yet. "We agreed that he would be here early in the morning," he said. "I better go see why he is so late."

When he was gone, I helped my mother, who had sciatica and could not walk by herself, to go to our neighbors' apartment to see what they had left there. As the *Volksdeutsche* they had brought many things from home in Ukraine. There was a small trunk full of bed linens, towels, and tablecloths. The bed had been left unmade and the blankets and the bedspread left behind. Also, there was a suitcase full of summer clothing and women's lingerie. Many small knick-knacks were scattered on the windowsills and in the kitchen.

But most of all, my mother was delighted to see all that they had left in the kitchen. There was a shelf full of jars with preserves and canned food. They had also left some sugar, salt, and flour, and a big box of potatoes. My mother exclaimed, "There is enough food here for about a month or even more." Then she corrected her estimate, "Of course, it will depend on how much the young Italian men eat."

I agreed and added, "We better watch to make sure nobody gets to it before we do."

Giulio returned from the camp alone. He placed a box on the kitchen table that he had brought from the camp and said, "The whole camp is empty, and there is nobody there. It looks as if they all left in a big hurry. Near the camp I encountered one Italian who stayed at his Polish girlfriend's house last night. He told me what he heard had happened. It seems that during the night many armed German soldiers surrounded the camp. All the foreign workers, including the Italians, and all the prisoners of war, the English and the Soviets, were ordered to march out under heavy guard."

Giulio looked at me and said, "I was lucky I brought all my belongings here yesterday; otherwise I would have lost everything."

"Yes," I said, "but the most important thing is that we were lucky you came here yesterday. If you had waited until this morning to come with Bruno, you would now be far away from here and we would never have seen each other again."

Giulio reflected for a few seconds and then said, "No, it was not luck, and it was

not by chance that I came here yesterday. I came because I wanted to be with you as soon as possible after your father was gone. I couldn't postpone coming here until this morning because it was very important for me not to leave you alone at such a difficult time for you." He embraced me and was holding me tight, as if he were afraid that if he let me go I could suddenly disappear. Then he kissed me and joyfully said, "The important thing is that we are together."

"But we were lucky," I insisted, "that the Germans did not evacuate the camp the night before when you were still there and we could have lost each other forever."

Giulio agreed, "Maybe, as you say, that was a one in a million lucky chance, or maybe it was destiny, or maybe both, that helped us to remain together."

My mother interrupted us because she was curious to find out what was in the box Giulio brought and asked him to show it. He opened the box and said, "Look what I found in the barracks of the English prisoners of war." And he pulled out several packages of English tea and a few packages of crackers.

"Uhh!" I said with surprise.

And my mother added, "There is enough tea for us to drink the whole year!"

My mother and I asked Giulio to tell us what he saw going on in the hamlet.

"Everywhere people are looting the abandoned apartments and houses," he said. "It looks as if a lot of people have left the town and the hamlet."

"It will be hard for us to watch our neighbors' apartment, especially during the night," my mother said. "It will be better to move all their belongings in the small room, which you just cleaned up. If the neighbors should return, we can always give it all back." Giulio and I agreed that it was the best thing to do. We moved a bed from the small room to the kitchen for him to sleep on and spent all afternoon moving everything from our neighbors' apartment to ours. Having their keys and their permission, we felt that we did it for safe¬keeping, but it was clear that they would never return.

Early the next morning Giulio and I decided to venture out to see if we could find some food in the abandoned apartments and homes. Giulio emptied his military backpack and I took our market bag just in case we found something. In the morning we did not go too far from the workers' hamlet. Most homes that we entered were already cleaned out by the others who came before us. Then in one home where the whole pantry was left empty we found one shelf full of jars with some yellow fruit cut in cubes and preserved in clear syrup.

"Why didn't they take these jars too?" I asked Giulio.

"Maybe they couldn't carry all that was here," he guessed.

"Or maybe they didn't like it. Let's try it," I said.

We opened one jar and to our surprise it was marinated pumpkin that had a very pleasant sour-sweet taste. We ate all the fruit and drank all the juice from the jar. Then we carefully placed some jars in my bag and the rest of the jars in the backpack, which became very heavy for Giulio to carry, so we returned home with our find.

In the afternoon we took the sled with us and ventured farther into town along the canal where there were several abandoned barges still full of black coal. On one of the barges the door of the cabin was wide open. We could see small pieces of white paper scattered on the deck and fluttering like butterflies in the light wind.

Giulio commented, "It was already looted. But let's go in and see if something was left inside. Maybe I could find there some tools."

Inside the cabin the floor was completely covered with small wrinkled pieces of fine white wrapping tissue. It appeared that someone had unwrapped the small packets searching for something useful and not finding anything of interest threw it all on the floor. I scooped up a handful of the scattered papers and saw all kinds of watch spare parts underneath. I showed them to Giulio, who was looking inside the bench drawers hoping to find some tools.

"This man was a watch repairmen," he said. "I found some fine jeweler's tools. Whoever looted here didn't know that they are very expensive. We will take them. However, don't bother to collect the spare watch parts because we would not know what to do with them."

Then Giulio saw a small jeweler's lathe attached to the bench and commented in admiration, "This is a fine little machine that costs a lot. But I would need some heavier tools to remove it from the bench. Let's go home and take the tools that I used to put the sled together." In a hurry we went home. Mama was surprised to see us back so soon. Giulio took the tools and a blanket to wrap the lathe and we walked back to the barge very fast.

Nobody else had come in our absence. Giulio began to busy himself dismounting the lathe and told me to collect some of the unwrapped packets with watch springs and other larger spare parts. "Who knows," he said "we may find some watch repairman who could be interested in them."

I was scooping up the paper on the floor searching for the un¬wrapped packets and carefully opening them to see what kind of parts were inside. Once in a while I would show them to Giulio and ask him if he wanted me to take them. Then I carefully un¬wrapped one packet containing three smaller packets and was expecting to find some watch parts inside.

"Ah-h-h!" I jumped up holding the packets securely in my hand. "Giulio! Look what I found!" And I showed him a golden ring with a clear yellow stone.
"It is a good find!" exclaimed Giulio, inspecting the ring. "Try it on, it looks like it should fit on one of your fin¬gers."

He put the ring on my left ring finger and it was just the right size. "Now you have an engagement ring and we are engaged," he said jokingly.

Then he saw that I was holding the other two small packets in my hand and asked. "What else is in there?" I opened my hand and carefully unwrapped one small golden wedding ring and then another larger one. We looked at each other with a pleasant surprise. Giulio shook his head in disbelief and said, "Lost one ring, found three rings."

"What do you mean?" I asked him, puzzled by what sounded to me like a riddle.

"Never mind," he answered. "It is a long story. I will explain it to you later."

With the serious expression on his face Giulio stood silently contemplating and looking at the two wedding rings in my hand. Then he said very slowly as he was reasoning with himself, "One wedding ring for the bride… and another for the groom…"

Suddenly his face lightened up, showing that he had found an answer to his reasoning. Resolutely, he took the smaller wedding ring and looking in my eyes asked solemnly as if he were performing a real wedding ceremony, "Lala, do you want to have Giulio as your husband?"

Although I was surprised to hear it from him at that moment, I thought that it was

a marriage proposal and answered, “I do.”

Slowly Giulio put the wedding ring on my left ring finger. Then he asked himself, "Giulio, do you want to have Lala as your wife?” And he answered, “I do.” And pointing to the larger wedding ring he extended his left ring finger toward me and said, “Put it on my finger.” As I was doing this, I wondered, both rings fit our fingers as if they were made to order.

Giulio joyfully announced, “Now, we are husband and wife before God as our witness.” And he concluded, “Amen!”

All smiling, he looked at me and asked, “May I kiss my bride?” And he gave me a long, long kiss, as he was sealing our union forever.

Everything happened so quickly that I couldn’t even imagine if Giulio was serious in what he said and did. I was speechless and looked at Giulio wondering if what had happened was not a dream.

“Do you realize,” he asked me joyfully, “that we just got married?”

“Did you really mean it?” I asked him with disbelief.

“Of course, I meant it! I love you! And you love me! How else can you explain why we found these three rings?” He asked me, puzzled himself by such a strange coincidence, and added, “Maybe it was pure chance, maybe it was a destiny, or maybe it was the will of God.” Then he added an Italian proverb, “*Anche il caso e il volere di Dio*.” And he promptly translated it for me, “A chance is also the will of God.”

Giulio looked around the cabin, then he spread his arms and said, “Look around, *mia piccola bimba del’cuor,*[3] with a little bit of imagination it looks like a small chapel prepared for our private wedding ceremony with the floor covered with white carpet of fluttering pieces of tissue paper that resemble flower petals...”

Suddenly the chaos of the looted cabin had transformed itself in our eyes into a romantic chapel. Giulio closed his arms around me and kissed me again and again...

I didn’t know yet if I was dreaming or if it was really happening to us. Giulio looked so happy and cheerful that I had to admit to myself that he really believed that the marriage ceremony he performed was genuinely true and joined us together before God.

Out of the cabin’s window the rays of the setting sun reminded us that it would be dark soon. Giulio said, “Let’s hurry up and go home.” He finished quickly removing the lathe from the bench and collected all the auxiliary parts that he could find. We wrapped everything in a blanket and carried it to our sled outside; together we pulled the heavy load on the slippery road toward our apartment.

We were walking fast and it was difficult for us to talk. We both were reflecting on the very strange coincidence of events that happened that afternoon. I was surprised that after the many months that Giulio had been cautious in not giving me any signs of his intentions to ask me to become his wife, suddenly he made a decision in a few moments after I found the rings. I could not understand this unexpected change in his behavior, but I didn't dare ask him about it. I only thought, “Be happy with what happened. Do not interfere with this magic moment by questioning him about his reasons for being cautious before and for being impulsive now. Be patient and wait. When the right time comes he will explain why.”

We arrived at our apartment and carried up the heavy find to the second floor and deposited it in the small room that by this time had become our storage room. My

mother looked at Giulio's find and asked, "What you will do with it?"

"I don't know yet. But it is a beautiful piece of machinery," answered Giulio and then half-jokingly added, "For now I will just admire it."

"Giulio," I said, "let's show Mama what else we found." And we extended our hands to show her our rings.

"Those are golden wedding rings!" she exclaimed. "Where did you find them?"

"I found them on the floor of the barge," I said. "Giulio decided that, if we found them, it was meant for us to wear them."

My mother looked at us shaking her head. "I hope you know what you are doing in these uncertain times."

"*Oui, Maman*,"[4] we answered together in French. We didn't dare mention to her anything else that happened to us on the barge.

Soon after the supper my mother went to sleep in our room and Giulio and I sat on his bed in the kitchen; we admired our rings and wondered about our find. I was waiting patiently for Giulio to tell me the mystery about his lost ring and maybe to explain his impulsive decision to perform a private marriage ceremony.

I already knew that Giulio was not married and knew something about his mother, father, and brother, with whom he lived. I also knew what schools he attended and what work he was doing before the war. I also knew where he had been during his military service. But I felt that he never felt free to talk about the most personal side of his life—about the girls in his life. And, though I was very curious, I did not pry, hoping that his secrets would not interfere with his affection for me. Now I felt that he was ready to open up and I waited with trepidation, hoping that what he would tell me would not destroy our love for each other. Giulio knew that I was waiting for him to explain the strange riddle about the rings that he said this afternoon.

To my surprise, he began by asking me a very strange question, "Is there a prejudice against illegitimate children in your country?" And without waiting for my answer added, "Would you be prejudiced against somebody who was born out of wedlock?"

"No," I answered promptly, puzzled by such a specific question and added, "Maybe such prejudice existed in Russia in the past, but in my time this has been accepted as a common part of life. It does not make any difference to me how a person was born."

"And how about your mother?" He asked. "Do you think she has such prejudice?"

"No, I am sure she does not. Her sister had a son born out of wedlock. He was very dear to her and I never heard anything from her of prejudice about him or about her sister."

"Good," said Giulio like my answer was very important to him. "You see," he explained, "in Italy this prejudice still exists."

Giulio got up and went to look for something in his baggage and returned with an envelope. He sat next to me, put his arm around my waist, pulled me close to him and said, "Now I will tell you why I said 'Lost one ring, found three rings' this afternoon when you found these rings on the barge. I told you that it was a long story. I never told it to anybody; you are the first one to hear it from me because I don't want to have any secrets from you. Let me collect my thoughts for a while to find the right place to start."

I was all attention and curious and anxious to hear what kind of a secret was

connected with the rings.

"You probably wondered," Giulio began to tell me, "why I was for such a long time so correct in my relationship with you. I cared for you but I didn't want to deceive you and was cautious not to give you false hope about our future. There was a very important reason for it: in Italy I have a fiancée to whom I was engaged for several years. In the summer of 1943, I was in Greece[5] and was waiting for a military leave to go to Italy to get married. At that time gold had to be used by the government to finance the war and it was impossible to buy a golden wedding ring at the jewelers. When my friend Pierin Panzeri was on leave home, he was able to buy a ring from his aunt and he gave it to me as a gift for my wedding.

"My uncle Pietro, my mother's older brother, was in charge of preparing all my documents required by law for the marriage license. Suddenly, I received a letter from my mother in which she wrote that there was a big quarrel between our and my fiancée's families regarding my original birth certificate, which was required for this purpose. In it I was registered by the last name given to me by the nuns at the hospital in Pisa, where I was born to my unwed mother.

This document was a surprise for everybody, including my mother. She believed that by making me adopted by her husband when she got married, she had forever removed from me the stigma of my illegitimate birth, because after I was adopted I was issued a new birth certificate with the last name of my adoptive father, Verro. Since that time this certificate was used for me everywhere, in schools, for work, and in the military service.

My mother kept this secret from me for twenty years until the time I enrolled as a volunteer in the Air Force. Only then she told me that I was born when she was nineteen years old girl and that my real father was a married man from Asciano, a village in Tuscany where my mother lived with her family. As my mother was telling me this story, which was painful for her, I didn't tell her that I knew from the day of her wedding in the village, when I was only four -years old, that the man she was marrying was not my real father. My mother also told me that she made a big sacrifice by not marrying one wealthy man only because he was not willing to adopt me and give me his name. There is so much to tell you about my mother; I shall recount it some other time."

Giulio paused for a while as if trying to remember why he started to tell me this story, "Now, let me tell you how the things are between me and my fiancée."

I was sitting quietly cuddled close to him and listening as he was confiding in me such intimate details about his origins. I felt that he didn't want to have any secrets between us. Now I knew that he was serious about wanting me to be his wife.

"Well," he said looking at the envelope he was holding all that time in his hand, "let me return to the time I was in Greece. First, I received a letter from my mother complaining about the quarrel with my fiancée's family. Shortly after, I received this letter from my fiancée."

Giulio slowly pulled her letter from the envelope and translated to me from Italian the last sentences that she wrote to him, "As a result of the situation that developed regarding your illegitimate birth, my parents don't approve anymore of my marriage to you. At this time all that I can tell you is that our chances of getting married are without hope. And for the future, in my opinion, I doubt that our marriage could be possible. Only if it's God's will, would we get married."

Giulio put the letter back in the envelope and placed it on the bed. Then he gently took my hand between his hands and continued, “Soon after I received these two letters all military leaves were cancelled and we didn’t receive any more mail from Italy. And afterward, all the Italian troops in Greece were deported to Germany as prisoners of war and I ended up in this camp in Laband. Notwithstanding my disappointment about the rejection of my fiancée, I still felt that I gave her my word to marry her and had an obligation to do it if her parents would change their decision on my return after the war. That’s why I couldn’t promise you anything before.”

I was overwhelmed with emotion and wanted to ask him, “And what happened now that you changed your mind?” But I was afraid even to speak those words.

Meanwhile, Giulio continued to tell me the rest of the story. “Here in the camp another strange thing happened. Only my friend Pierin Panzeri knew about the wedding ring that he gave me as a wedding gift. One day I had discovered that the ring had disappeared from the breast pocket of my uniform jacket, where it was very well secured with a safety pin. That’s why today when you found the three rings on the barge I said, ‘Lost one ring, found three rings.’ At that moment it dawned on me that it was indeed ‘God’s will,’ as my fiancée wrote to me, and that it was not her that I was to marry because her wedding ring had mysteriously disappeared.

Giulio embraced me and concluded, “Finding the new wedding rings with you was the sign for me that it was the will of God to marry you. At that moment of revelation I impulsively did what I felt ought to be done, I performed our marriage ceremony with only God as our witness. I have heard that it can be done under the extraordinary circumstances, and our circumstances were indeed extraordinary.”

Giulio paused for a while and continued, “Now you understand why I am so sure that it is meant to be that we, you and I, met in this place far from our homes and our countries and that we fell in love with each other. We could call it lucky chance, or call it destiny, or call it the will of God. No matter how we call it, I am glad that it did happen. Today we made a commitment to each other to be husband and wife.” Giulio said these words with such emotion by putting in them his heart and soul, as if he suddenly felt free from his vows to his fiancée, which until today were still binding him with an invisible web of obligation to marry her.

Cuddling close to him I said, “I am very happy too, that we met and fell in love and that we are together. But who knows if we could remain together after the Soviets come.”

Giulio embraced me reassuringly and kissed gently as if he was opening a happy beginning between him and me. For a while we sat close to each other, silently reflecting on Giulio's logical conclusion to the unexplainable chain of events that happened to us. I felt that by sharing his intimate secrets Giulio wanted us to become closer to each other. I felt that the invisible bond between him and me that we already had for a while suddenly became so strong that it overwhelmed me and I shivered.

“It is becoming cold in here,” Giulio said interrupting the silence, and got up to add some coal to the stove.

It was the first time that Giulio told me his secrets but I felt that I needed an answer to one more question that was very important for me to know and asked him, “Did you love your fiancée very much?”

“Well,” he said, “now it is very hard to tell. When I proposed to her, I believed that I

loved her. But, after she wounded my pride by renouncing our marriage, I reflected a lot about my feelings for her and about her feelings for me. She was not a very young girl, she was of my age, and, if she was really in love with me, she could have disregarded her parents' religious and moral arguments. But she didn't.

"It could only mean that she didn't love me enough, she was looking only to get married. Of course, it did not help that during most of our courtship and engagement I was away in the Air Force and we saw each other only during my short military leaves. And even then we never had a chance to know each other better. Most of all, I never felt from her that spontaneous warmth that emanates from a person who is in love; when I touched her she behaved as a marble statue who cannot show her emotions.

Her parents, who were devoted Catholics, were very strict and did not allow us to be alone, neither in the home, nor when we were going out; they always sent her younger sister with us when we went out for a walk or to the movies."

He reflected for a few seconds and concluded, "Now it seems that I knew better her sister Rita than her; she was a vivacious young girl always keeping the conversation going and setting the mood for the three of us."

"Then you were not really passionately in love with her?" I asked him.

He looked at me with a smile and said, "She also was not passionately in love with me. She never looked at me with such love in her eyes as I can see in your eyes when you look at me. I am sure that she liked me and considered that I was a good man to have as a husband, until the inconvenient birth certificate appeared."

"You didn't tell me her name," I said.

"Elsa," he replied.

"It's a German name," I commented.

"It is used in Italy too."

Then I dared to ask him, "Was she very pretty?"

"She had very beautiful hair, the color of copper. But what I really didn't like about her was that she used a very heavy makeup, probably to cover up her freckles, which people with red hair usually have. And I remember," he added this with a grimace, "that in those rare moments when we had the chance to be alone for a few minutes and I was able to give her a quick kiss on the cheek, it was very unpleasant to feel the makeup instead of the clean skin of her face."

I was surprised to hear his answers and asked him, "Why did you decide to marry her if there were so many things that you didn't like about her, especially her coldness and her lack of emotions?"

"Well, I always thought that her strict Catholic upbringing didn't allow her to show them before marriage and that she would change after our wedding. I almost valued it as a sign of her purity. And I appreciated many positive sides about her. She was brought up in a good moral family and was serious about marriage. She knew how to keep the house, she was a very good cook, and she was able to sew, even to sew men's pants, and she embroidered well. She was a serious girl and I believed that she could be a good wife and mother to my children."

"Do you have her picture to show me?" I asked.

"I had it, but after receiving this letter when I was in Greece, I ripped it in small pieces and threw it away."

"You were very upset with her then," I commented.

“Of course, I was,” he answered quickly.

“Was she your first love?” I inquired further.

“Oh, no!” he answered emphatically. “My real first love was a young Spanish girl called Margarita. I really had a big crush on her. It happened when I was in Spain.”

“Why didn’t you marry her?” I asked, being surprised that he was so openly enthusiastic about her and was not afraid of making me jealous.

“Well, at that time I was a very young mercenary soldier. I couldn’t bring her to Italy where I didn’t have any job and could not offer her economic security. She was more mature and more practical than I was and when she found out this, she told me straightforward that I had nothing to offer her beside my love. We quarreled. Disappointed and heart-stricken I asked to return to Italy. Shortly after my return home I found a good job with the telephone company and that’s when I met Elsa, who was working as a switchboard operator in a big hospital.”

Our conversation had lost its spontaneity by returning back to his fiancée, about whom Giulio didn’t want to talk anymore, and he gave me a “good night” kiss and told me to go to sleep. I tiptoed in the bedroom trying not to wake up my mother.

It was already after midnight and compared to the previous nights there was an unusual eerie quiet on the streets. The events of that day were overwhelming. I couldn’t collect my thoughts; ideas and facts were jumping in my mind from one to another and I couldn’t fall asleep. Sometimes it seemed that all that happened that day was just a dream and that tomorrow morning it would just disappear in the light of the day.

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1. “They are going, they are going. Where are they going?”
2. See the chapter “The Prince of My Dreams.”
3. “Little girl of my heart” - in Italian.
4. “Yes, Mama.
5. See the chapter “Italy Allies With Germany.”

Chapter 14

The Snapped Rope

By Olga Gladky Verro
Also as Remembered by Giulio Verro

Early in the morning on the twenty-fifth of January[1] we saw the first Soviet Army soldiers from our windows; they were going from door to door checking the apartments in the hamlet of Laband. There were no civilians daring to go outside—everybody was waiting to see what the Soviet Army's next move would be. My mother said, "Quickly remove your golden wedding rings and hide them." We obeyed, although very reluctantly.

When we heard heavy knocking at the door of the downstairs apartment and then the steps of the soldiers on the stairs, my mother said, "Help me walk to the door to greet the soldiers."

"Good morning, soldiers!" she greeted them cheerfully, trying to conceal her fear. They were not surprised to hear her speak Russian; it seemed that they already knew there were many of their fellow countrymen in the hamlet.

"Good morning, Aunty," they greeted her.

"Tell us who is living here," asked one of them while the other one checked the rooms.

"Me, my daughter, and an Italian prisoner of war," answered my mother. "He escaped from the prisoner of war camp and we gave him refuge. As you can see, I cannot walk well and he is helping us with the heavy chores like bringing the coal from the cellar."

The other soldier interrupted her, "Isn't he a German? Tell him to show us his documents."

Giulio showed him his camp pass saying, "*Lager* pass."

"It's cold outside, soldiers," said my mother to distract them from further examining Giulio. "I have the tea kettle on the stove. Do you want to drink some hot tea?"

"Why not?" said one of them.

"Of course," said the other one.

"Well, sit down here at the table," my mother invited them. I placed two glasses on the table, and poured the hot tea saying, "We don't have any sugar."

"It's all right. We are used to doing without it."

One of the soldiers saw the two packages of tea that were in full view on the shelf and grinned, "Ah-h, Aunty, you drink English tea."

"English prisoners of war were here in the camp," explained my mother. "We got it from them."

Giulio took the two packages of tea from the shelf, gave the open package to my mother, and placed the unopened one in front of the soldiers and said pointing to each, "One for Mama, one for soldiers." It was a smart move because after that they did not think to look to see if we had more tea hidden somewhere else.

As the soldiers were drinking tea, my mother asked them where they were from. They named small hamlets or villages somewhere in Russia that were not known to us. My mother commented, “It is far away in Russia.” And they specified the regions, confirming that indeed it was a long way from here.

Then one of the soldiers said, “Well, Aunty, thank you for the tea. We have to go check other apartments.”

Before leaving the other one asked, “Where are the people who lived next door? We saw the door open and nobody and nothing is in there.”

“They left several days ago. We don’t know anything about them,” answered my mother.

“And who is living on the first floor? They didn’t open the door when we knocked.”

“A widow with a small child. They are probably still sleeping,” tried to justify my mother.

They believed her because they didn’t bother to go there and we saw them going out and across the street to another building.

After those soldiers left, no others came that day. My mother insisted that we, especially Giulio, not go out. Toward late afternoon I convinced her to let me make a quick run to see my aunt and the children.

My aunt said that she had instructed Fredik to say, if he was asked, that his father was in the Red Army. The little boy, who was not more than nine years old, understood that this lie was necessary to protect them from harm.

While I was away Giulio showed that he was the man of the family. He went in our neighbors’ cellar and moved all the wood they had to our cellar. And he said that he probably should also move the coal. After doing that heavy work he went to take a shower and we heard him singing.

When he came out clean and smiling, my mother asked him, “Giulio, how can you sing at such a difficult time?”

“I am happy,” he answered. “The Italians sing when they are happy.”

After the first inspection of town and the workers’ hamlet very few Soviet Army soldiers remained stationed there. During the first couple of weeks of Soviet occupation of Laband most of the soldiers were guarding the strategic points, such as the railroad station and the *Presswerke* factory.

Very ominous rumors spread quickly among the Russians Ukrainians, the *Volksdeutsche,* and other nationalities from the Soviet Union. The rumors were that everyone who was in Germany would be deported to concentration camps in Siberia. They also suggested that getting voluntarily back to the Soviet territory as quickly as possible, before the mass deportation to concentration camps, could be the best solution to avoid being deported.

My mother, heavily limping from the sciatica pain, ventured to visit some of our neighbors. She came back and told Giulio and me, "The people I talked to said that the best route to Ukraine by foot is to go to the town of Czestochowa[2] where there is a checkpoint for those who are returning voluntarily back home."

I sat with my mother on her bed and had a lengthy discussion with her in Russian about the pros and cons of this solution. Giulio, who couldn’t understand Russian, was impatiently walking back and forth in the kitchen waiting to hear our decision.

“Mama, you cannot walk.” I said. “This was the reason we remained here and

didn't go with Papa and Igor. How do you plan to walk now?"

"Well," she explained, "one of our neighbors bought a horse and he agreed to put me on the cart; that is if you feel that you could walk. We will pay him with the things that we found in our neighbor's apartment. We shall put what we can from our stuff on the small sled, which the man said we could attach with a rope to his cart."

"And what about Giulio?" I asked her anxiously knowing right away that this would separate us from each other. But my mother's self-preservation instinct didn't include preservation of my happiness of being with Giulio.

"It will be his decision what he wants to do," she replied.

"You know what this means?" I asked, "It means that I will lose him forever."

My mother promptly replied, "You will lose him anyway when we are deported to the concentration camps in Siberia."

"But it would not be immediately and we could be happy a few weeks longer." But when my mother made a decision, nothing could convince her to change her mind.

I explained my mother's decision to Giulio. He wondered if it was wise for her to travel in such cold winter sitting on the cart full of the neighbor's belongings.
"How far is this town of Czestochowa anyway?" he asked us.

"We don't know."

"Well," he said, "if you think that this is the best solution for you, I will go with you because you will need help on your way there." Then he asked, "Do you think they will allow me to go with you to the Soviet Union?"

"Do you mean you want to go with us all the way there?" I asked.

"Of course," he replied, "I don't want to leave you! Remember, we are husband and wife."

"Giulio, you are completely unaware of the Soviet paranoia—they consider all foreigners to be spies," I answered him in a definite tone of voice. "They will never allow you to cross the border. And if they did allow it, we would be separated. As a foreigner, they would send you for sure to a different concentration camp from the one where they send us."

"If you are convinced that they will send you to a concentration camp, why are you going now? Wait until they deport you; at least you will be traveling on the train."

His reasoning made lots of sense. And I went back to my mother and tried to convince her that Giulio was right. But she made up her mind that if we returned voluntarily our punishment would not be as severe as if we were deported from here. There was nothing to do but to pack as many of our belongings as we could load on the sled.

We went to say good-bye to my aunt and the children. My aunt was surprised that we had made this decision. She agreed with Giulio. "If they have to send us to concentration camps, let them provide the transportation!"

We told my aunt to send Fredik to our house early the next morning to take our keys so they could have whatever remained in our apartment. We said that we hoped to see them sometimes and somewhere when they also return to the Soviet Union. And we embraced each of them kissing and saying good-bye.

Early in the morning all three of us put on warm clothing. Giulio and I brought our packed luggage down the stairs, and tied it down with rope to the sled. In addition, Giulio and I had backpacks with more stuff and bags with food.

Our neighbor was finishing loading his cart. Giulio secured the sled to the back of the cart with rope and then we helped my mother climb up the cart, where she had to sit very uncomfortably on top of the piled bundles. I covered her with a warm woolen blanket, hoping that she would be able to withstand her sciatica pain. We gave our keys to Fredik, who remained to watch our departure.

Finally, the neighbor and his wife got in front of the horse, he took the reins, and the cart slowly moved forward. Giulio and I were walking behind the sled watching to make sure that it didn't turn over. Our sled was bumping on packed snow on the pavement and Giulio had to straighten it from going to the side of the cart. We had hardly progressed a dozen meters from our apartment door as the sled got stuck on a rough spot clear from the snow. The horse made a sharp pull and the rope holding our sled snapped.

"Stop! Stop! Stop!" we both screamed to the neighbor, who reluctantly stopped the horse. Giulio tried to make a knot in the rope close to where it was attached to the cart, but the end was very short and he told me to explain to our neighbor that he had to go in our apartment to get another piece of rope. The neighbor did not want to lose time waiting for us and began to scream that we were only a burden for him.

Without consulting us, Giulio made a sudden decision. He went to the side of the cart where my mother was sitting and ordered her, "*Maman*, get down! We are not going anywhere. This arrangement is not working. After a few meters it could happen again and again. Get down!"

And we helped her to get down from the cart and removed the bundle we gave our neighbor for his service. The neighbor immediately took off and we remained right in the middle of the street with our sled. We could not move the sled and had to unload our luggage and bring it piece by piece upstairs to our apartment.

Exhausted, we sat in our kitchen and Giulio commented, "It was not our destiny to go to Czestochowa. The snapped rope was just a warning sign for us that we should remain here."

My mother, who had sat for only a few minutes on the cart, said, "I don't think I could have resisted sitting in that position for very long. The sciatica was already beginning to hurt me very badly."

"I am glad we are back here," I said to Giulio. "At least we can stay together a little while longer. Who knows, when they will start to deport us back to the Soviet Union?"

Giulio embraced me and concluded, "It seams that we all are glad that our departure to Czestochowa failed."

We unpacked all our luggage and put everything back where it had been before. At the end of the day we were all very tired and after supper Giulio suggested that we go to sleep early. "There is one Italian proverb that says: '*La notte porta il consiglio*.'" And he translated: "The night is the mother of counsel."

The next day there were fewer people leaving for Czestochowa. But my mother observed from her place near the kitchen window that people were hurrying somewhere with empty sleds and carts. "*Ils vont, ils vont. Ou il vont*?"[3] she was asking. "Giulio, Lyalya come here. They probably found something somewhere..."

"Do you want us to go and see where they are going?" asked Giulio.

My mother hesitated to answer. On one side, she did not want to lose an

opportunity to get what the others were going to get, maybe some food; on the other side, she was scared to let us go and maybe face some danger from the Soviet soldiers.

Well, Giulio made a decision, “Lala, get dressed. We are going to see where these people are going.”

We took our sled and followed the others. They led us to the far end of the railroad yard where many freight cars were parked; some were open and empty and some were locked. We stopped and observed what was going on.

Two women with a cart carrying a sack full of something were coming in our direction. Giulio told me to ask them what it was and where they got it. We waited for them and I asked them in German. Before answering me the younger woman translated my question to the older one in Russian.

"Ah-h, you speak Russian," I said.

The older one asked, “Are you Russian too?”

“I am from Ukraine,” I answered, “and he is my friend, an Italian prisoner of war.”

“Well, if you go behind those cisterns,” the older woman gestured in that direction, “there are several freight cars loaded with bags of sugar.”

“But be careful,” warned the younger one, “there is one very young Soviet soldier guarding it. If you speak to him in Russian, like we did, he will speak to you. I think he is lonely and does not mind exchanging a few words in Russian. He just might give you one bag like he gave us.”

“*Spasibo, spasibo*[4] for your advice,” I thanked them in Russian. I translated to Giulio what they said and he agreed to try our luck.

We went toward the cisterns. As we passed them we saw several freight cars. The door of one car was open and the Soviet soldier with the gun across his shoulder was leaning against the side of the door; behind him was a car full of bags with sugar.

“Stop!” he gave us a warning. We stopped.

“Soldier,” I said in Russian, “my Russian friends told me that we may find some sugar here. I couldn’t carry it alone and asked this Italian prisoner of war to help me.”

“Are you Russian? Where are you from?” the soldier asked.

“I am from the Donbass region of Ukraine.”

“Ah, I know where it is. I am from Kursk,” he answered and with his hand gave a sign to come closer.

We came to the car door and I continued the friendly conversation with him, “It is a long way from home for both of us.”

“Sure it is,” he replied. Then asked, “Have you been here long?”

“More then two years and we don’t know how long we have to stay before we can go home. Nobody gives us any food. With the sugar we could barter for other foods while we are waiting to be sent home.”

The soldier grabbed one bag and pushed it toward the door.

“Here, catch it,” he said to Giulio, who could barely keep it from falling on the snow. I helped him put it on the sled.

“*Spasibo, spasibo*!” I said sincerely to the young soldier and added, “I hope that you return home safely.”

The soldier waved his hand dismissing us, “Go! Go! Before somebody sees that I gave you the sugar.”

Giulio pulled the sled and said, "I hope that the rope will not snap again. You

better help by pushing the sled on the rough spots."

My mother couldn't believe that we were so lucky to get a whole bag of sugar. The next day we took my aunt some sugar and she gave us some potato starch that she was able to barter with her neighbors for something else. She was glad that the children could have sugar to supplement their diet.

Every day, more and more Soviet soldiers were appearing in town. They were searching the apartments looking for food and alcohol. One day, two of them knocked at our door and arrogantly rushed right into the kitchen.

My mother, who was sitting there, greeted them in Russian and asked them to sit down. Hearing that she spoke in their native tongue they changed their aggressive approach.

They sat down at the table and one of them said, "Aunty, do you have some salt? We need it for our field kitchen."

My mother said to me, "Lyalya, bring in the whole bag of salt that we have; we will share it with these soldiers."

I went to the small room and brought the bag with salt, which was about five kilograms. When I put the bag on the table, my mother told me, "Take a bowl and fill it with salt for us and give the rest to the soldiers for their kitchen."

It was a smart decision because the soldiers had what they asked for and had no reason to search for it. This meant that the whole bag of sugar hidden in that room was safe. They even said "*Spasibo"* to us and left quickly.

Giulio and I took the advice of my mother and didn't venture out for a couple of days. Giulio found something to do by moving the coal from our neighbors' cellar to ours. The cold winter was still ahead and it was wise to have a good supply of fuel. After several hours of hard work he returned from the cellar all covered with black dust. He was singing while taking a shower and was very hungry at a mealtime. My mother was not used to feeding a young healthy man and she was concerned that our provisions were disappearing fast.

Then the potatoes that we found at our neighbors' apartment began to spoil and my mother decided to use the bad ones to make potato starch. We discarded the rotten parts and ground the good parts on a meat grinder that we borrowed from my aunt. We placed the ground mash in containers with lots of water, allowing the starch to deposit on the bottom. Then we removed the fiber, which being lighter remained on top, and slowly scooped out the water, leaving the rest of the water to evaporate. To use all that starch my aunt gave us a recipe for delicious starch cookies that were friable without much flour or fat. This enterprise kept us busy for almost a week.

Giulio worked with us and accompanied his work by softly singing Italian songs, of which he had an inexhaustible repertoire. He had a nice, harmonious voice and I liked to hear him sing. But my mother was constantly reminding him, "How can you sing at such a difficult time?" Especially, when he was singing in the morning, she would tell him a well known Russian proverb: "*Rano ptashechka sapyela, kak by coshechka nye s'yela*." Which means: "The little bird began to sing too early; beware not to be eaten by the cat."

Giulio was answering her with a smile, "*Maman*, I am happy. I sing when I am happy."

Now that Giulio was living with us we had lots of time together. Mornings, days,

evenings, and nights were filled with discovering new things about each other. We spoke only in French, which I mastered very quickly, and we were able to talk in a more refined and concise language. During the long winter evenings Giulio was reading aloud the French version of “The Thousand and One Nights”, a luxury edition of the book with beautiful illustrations. It was a book that our neighbors left behind when they fled from the Soviets.

When on the fourteenth of January 1945 we celebrated my twenty-second birthday, Giulio gave me as a gift his white woolen undershirt that was standard winter underwear in the Italian Air Force. And I found myself a useful hobby. I unraveled the yarn, washed it, and began to knit myself a pullover with a shell design from instructions given me by my aunt. I was eager to show Giulio my skills because he told me that his mother was an experienced knitter and made very fine items. Having lots of free time I finished the pullover quickly and was rewarded by Giulio’s praise for an excellent job.

We also had plenty of time to recount stories to each other about our families and ourselves. Although Giulio already knew much about my life, there still were many things that he wanted to know. Usually we talked about my family in the evening after supper when my mother also had a chance to participate.

After my mother went to bed, Giulio felt more at ease telling me many things about himself and his family. I was fascinated, listening night after night as he narrated his story - like chapters in a book about his life and his adventures. I was discovering how and where he grew up, who his parents were, what kind of childhood he had, what schools he attended, why he went as a volunteer into the Italian Air Force, what he did in a Legionary Air Force in Spain, where he was and what he did during this war that was still going on, and how it happened that he became a prisoner of war in Germany.[5]

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1. See the chapters “Chance, Destiny, or the Will of God” and “The Prince of My Dreams.”
2. A town in Poland about 70 kilometers northeast of Laband.
3. “They are going... They are going... Where are they going?” [in French].
4. “Thank you, thank you” [in Russian].
5. See the chapters “The Village of Asciano,” “Dea Egeria,” “Giulio Is Growing Up,” “Volunteer in The Italian Air Force,” “Italy Allies With Germany,” and “Italian Armistice.”

Chapter 15

The NKVD Camp In Laband

By Olga Gladky Verro
Also as Remembered by Antonina G. Berezhnaya Gladky and Giulio Verro

In the first weeks of February 1945 rumors spread quickly that the infamous Soviet NKVD[1] had arrived at the workers' hamlet of Laband and taken over the now empty *Kriegsgefangenelager,*[2] the barracks where previously were housed the English and Russian pri¬soners of war, the former Italian prisoners of war, whose status was later changed to foreign workers, and the rest of the camp where single foreign workers from European countries lived. The NKVD also took over several adjacent apartment buildings, in which they established the offices, a cafeteria and living quarters for the officers and guards; they also encircled the whole complex with additional barbwire.

This event put in a state of alarm the inhabitants of the hamlet: families from the Soviet Union—the *Volksdeutsche* and the specialist foreign workers, the latter category to which my family belonged; and families from eastern part of Poland and Baltic States annexed by Stalin before WW II. All these families believed that the NKVD was preparing the camp for processing Soviet citizens. With great fear and anxiety they expected that very soon they would be deported to the concentration camps in the remote regions of the Soviet Union.

One evening during that week, after my mother went to sleep, Giulio and I were in the kitchen sitting on his bed and talking about these unconfirmed but widely believed rumors. Trying not to allow my voice to sound heavy with sadness I told him, "My dear Giulio, there is not much time left for us to be together. Our happiness will end very soon. Let's make the best of these final days, making them unforgettable for the rest of our lives."

"I shall be delighted to make these days unforgettable," Giulio agreed putting his arm around my waist and squeezing me close to his body, "but not because they are our last days together." And he reassured me, "I don't intend to leave you. If you are deported, I shall go with you. I have always wanted to know more about the Soviet Union. This will be the right time to find out if what I have heard so far about it is true."

"My dearest," I replied to his naive notion about the ease of being admitted to the so-called workers' paradise, "you still don't understand the communist's paranoia about foreigners who are all considered to be spies of capitalist world." And I repeated what I said to him before, "Believe me, they would never allow you to go with us. And, if they did, they certainly wouldn't allow us to be together; they would put you in the concentration camp for spies, and me and my mother in a camp for those whom they call 'collaborators' because we were in Germany during the war."

"We shall see if you are right," replied Giulio, unconvinced by my reasoning. "In Italian there is one proverb very appropriate for this case; '*Non fasciarti la testa prima che è rotta*.'" And he translated, "Don't bandage your head before it is broken." Giulio

playfully touched my forehead like he was inspecting it and said, “It is not broken yet.”

He smiled and embraced me, holding tightly as if trying to show me that he would not let go of me. I was not smiling and to cheer me up he said, “Now, Lala, if you want us to have this evening filled with happiness, remove that sad expression from your face. I will sing you a serenade to cheer you up, “*O, campagnola bella, to sei la Reginella...*”[3]

Giulio's optimism was contagious and he was able to put me in a good mood and make me forget my sad thoughts. His love and his gentle caresses filled that evening with unforgettable happiness.

In the following days, everybody in the hamlet observed the work progress in the Soviet NKVD camp with trepidation. To everybody’s surprise, the NKVD agents didn't pay any attention to the Soviet citizens at that time. Instead, with great speed they began to fill the barracks in the camp with German civilian men, whom they had rounded up on the streets and taken from their homes. From the number of men brought to the camp, this operation seemed to be conducted on a large scale, with German men being taken from the neighboring towns and villages and probably from the whole region of *Oberschlesia* and beyond.

In broad daylight the armed NKVD guards led the German men through the streets of Laband like the herds of sheep, through the gates and into the camp. It was surprising to see those men, who only a few weeks before had proudly displayed their superiority over the workers of other nationalities, looking and behaving exactly like the *Ostarbaitern* and the prisoners of war when they were led by armed German guards. Like them, now the German men walked with curved backs and heads bent down. Like them, they walked slowly, many dragging their feet after a long march from their hometowns. Like them, once in a while one of the men deprived of cigarettes would pick up a cigarette butt from the ground; it was probably discarded by the Soviet soldier, a foreign worker, or a local Polish citizen.

Suddenly the roles were reversed and the German men experienced what it meant to be conquered and to be at the mercy of the occupying enemy army. Only the local Polish population was glad to see the Germans pay the price for the German government’s arrogance in annexing Polish land. Most of the Soviet citizens living in the hamlet felt sympathy for the captured German men because they knew what awaited them in captivity and because it was only a matter of time before they would also be led into that camp.

One morning during that week my mother was sitting near the kitchen window, as it was her habit when she was having sciatica pain, and watched what was happening on our street. I was cleaning the bedroom, and Giulio was adding coal to the stove. Suddenly I heard my mother calling me with fear in her voice, “Lyalya, Lyalya! Come here quickly. There are Fredik and Nanochka[4] coming here with two Soviet officers! Go and open the door for them.”

Fear made my heart beat so fast that it seemed as if it would jump out of my chest. I opened the door before the officers had a chance to knock and saluted them, “Good morning! Come in, come in, please.” I invited them to the kitchen.

One of the officers very politely introduced himself, “I am Captain Komov.” And then the other officer, who seemed to be of higher rank, also introduced himself. My mother introduced all three of us, “I am Antonina Gavriylovna Gladkaya.[5] This is my

daughter Olga, and this is Giulio Verro, an Italian prisoner of war and my daughter's..."

I promptly added, "My husband."

The officers politely shook hands with the three of us. My mother invited them to sit down at the kitchen table and offered them a cup of tea, as she usually did with all military visitors.

This invitation had worked well with all other uninvited visitors and always provided a more relaxed and friendly atmosphere. She used it consciously, as a defensive move, rather than as a happy hostess who wanted to please her guests. This time it worked again in her favor; the officers accepted the invitation.

While the teakettle was warming up and I was setting the table, Captain Komov began to explain why the children brought them to see us. "We went this morning to the apartments where most of the *Volksdeutsche* live, hoping to find interpreters who were able to speak, read, and write both German and Russian. To our surprise we found only one woman with such qualifications. Then your sister-in-law told us that you and your daughter are the right people for whom we are searching, and she told her children to accompany us to your apartment. Now, tell us if you indeed can speak, write, and read both German and Russian."

My mother answered, "Yes, we can."

"What did you do before the war?" inquired Captain Komov.

"I was a teacher for more then twenty years," my mother said proudly. "I taught Russian language and literature and sometimes also German language."

And I said, "I was a student in the Moscow Power Institute and studied German language for six years."

"Well, it sounds good to me," concluded Captain Komov, looking at the other officer.

As though he did not anticipate any objections, the higher-ranking officer ordered us, "You are both drafted as interpreters at the NKVD camp for as long as we shall need you. You will be working under Captain's Komov's supervision and he will explain to you in detail what will be expected from you."

Captain Komov informed us right away, "You may sometimes work long hours, and sometimes in the evenings. You will not be paid for your work, but you will be provided with the same food rations that all our servicemen are receiving."

I was anxious about leaving Giulio and asked, "Could we remain living here in this apartment?"

Captain Komov smiled and reassured me, "Of course, of course, you may live here with your husband."

The two officers got up without finishing their tea and before leaving Captain Komov added, "Come tomorrow morning at eight o'clock to the camp's main gate near the one-story brick house and tell the guard that you have come to see Captain Komov. They will let you through and tell you where to find me."

The two officers again politely shook hands with the three of us and left.

Because all the conversation was in Russian and all happened so quickly, he couldn't figure out what it was all about, we had to explain it to Giulio in French.

Mama asked him, "Have you recognized that they were NKVD officers? But they didn't inquire anything about Papa, or why we happened to be here in Germany. They just ordered us to work for them without any inquiry into our past."

“Can you imagine,” I asked Giulio, “that we will actually be working for the NKVD?! It is so scary, like working in the lion’s den.”

My mother was still concerned that we could be interrogated later to check our political background and said to me, “We have to agree what we shall tell them, in case they ask us about your father.”

“Well,” I suggested, “we have to tell them very simply without too many details, the same thing that Antonina Yulyevna and children tell about Igor, ‘Papa was taken by the first Soviet troops that came through the town of Laband: two soldiers came in the apartment and ordered him to go with them.’”

“All right, no other details,” said my mother. “We don’t want to contradict ourselves and get into trouble.”

I agreed, “It’s better not to volunteer any information.”

Giulio said to my mother, “You were worrying that we didn’t find much food when we were searching the abandoned homes. Now you will be provided with food by the least expected source, the infamous NKVD!”

I added, “For as long as they need us.”

The next morning, before we left for work, Giulio retrieved the engagement and wedding rings from the hidden place, put them on my left ring-finger, and said very seriously, “From now on you should wear them all the time to let everybody know that you are married. It will protect me from losing you to some young NKVD agent.”

“Giulio,” I reproached him, “how can you even think such a thing? I love you!”

“I know,” he said. “But it is safer when the others know this too.” Then he explained that he would hide his wedding ring for now to protect it from being taken by an unexpected Soviet soldier who might come during the day looking for loot. Before leaving we taught him a few Russian words that could be helpful to him in dealing with uninvited Red Army visitors.

“Don’t you worry,” he said, “I know very well how to invite them to have a cup of tea.” He kissed me and before we left he wished us both good luck.

When we arrived at the camp gate, we met another woman who would be working with us. We had never met her before in the hamlet or at work. She was very cautious in giving us information about herself, telling us only that her name was Zhenya, that she was a *Volksdeutsche* and lived in the hamlet with her mother and her three children, and that she was literate and fluent in both German and Russian. Neither she nor my mother mentioned anything about their husbands.

Captain Komov directed us first to the camp’s security office, where we were given passes for the camp with the NKVD seal. When we returned, Captain Komov took charge of our training right away. He explained that our work was to register the German men who were brought to the camp. We were ordered to follow the precise procedure—no deviation.

First, we had to ask each man to show us his documents, from which we could find the exact information about him so we could write it in Russian. Second, we had to register each man by his name, address, and occupation. There were three lists to which the man could be allocated. To do that, we and the men were instructed to speak clearly and loudly so the other men waiting silently in line would hear—giving them a chance to correct that information in case the man had provided a false answer. The questions had to be asked in the following prescribed order:

"Were you ever a member of the Nazi Party?"[6]

"Have you ever served in the SS,[7] or in the Gestapo?"[8]

"Have you been an officer in any branch of the German military?"

All those men who belonged to any of these infamous organizations, no matter what else they were, had to be registered on the First List that Captain Komov informally named as "The Fascists List."

Those who didn't belong to these organizations had to be allocated to one of the two other lists according to their occupation or the work they were qualified to do.

On the Second List, he named as "The Laborers List," had to be registered all those who declared themselves to be students, teachers, white-collar workers, office employees, bankers, merchants, artists, farmers, and all kinds of unskilled laborers.

On the Third List, he named "The Specialists List," had to be registered engineers, scientists, technicians, medical doctors, other medical personnel, all kinds of skilled and trained workers in the various trades, such as electricians, bricklayers, carpenters, mechanics, miners, machine operators, and metallurgical workers.

Occasionally we had to consult with Captain Komov in his office about some occupation and on which list we had to register a man. However, it became clear to us right away that the men were selected for work on the various projects to reconstruct the Soviet cities and industry after the ravages of war.

In the beginning, before the first echelon of deportees had departed from Laband, the German men suspected, but didn't know for sure, why they were put in the NKVD camp and what their captors intended to do with them. Most of them assumed that they would be sent to do some kind of work on the local or regional reconstruction projects in their own country. Probably some of them guessed that they would be deported to the Soviet Union as civilian prisoners of war.

There was rarely a chance for the men to ask us questions because there was always a low ranking NKVD officer in the room who supervised them and us. Besides, we were not allowed to engage in conversations with the detainees.

One day I had to register two young men who spoke German with strong French accents. It just happened that at that moment the NKVD officer was not in the room. I asked them in French if they were Frenchmen, which they confirmed.

"Why are you here then?" I asked. "Why don't you request to be released if you are not German?"

"We did ask when they brought us here and we were told that we should complain with the authorities when we arrived at the next checkpoint."

"Do you want me to talk to the Captain?" I offered.

"No." They both answered promptly.

"We were already told that they are not releasing anybody from this camp," said one.

"We will do as we were told," added the other.

I dared to tell them, "The sooner you do it, the better chance for you to be released."

The young Frenchmen showed signs of being annoyed with my suggestions and one of them repeated stubbornly, "We were told to complain at another checkpoint."

It was clear that they didn't trust me and didn't believe me. "Do you want to give me the addresses of your relatives in France?" I asked them. "When the war ends, I

would write to them and notify them what happened to you."

"There is no need for it," said the one who was more stubborn than the other. "We are sure that this misunderstanding of our nationality will be cleared up at the next checkpoint and we will be released."

I was sorry that they were so naive. Moreover, they insisted on being registered as students, which, they didn't know and I couldn't tell them, meant they would be sent to work as laborers on the heavy projects. I tried to help, but it was their choice. At the end of the day I told Captain Komov that there were two Frenchmen among the Germans.

His answer was simple but convincing to justify their presence in this group. "Probably, they are Germans from the Alsace-Lorraine[9] region," he said, "otherwise they would not be here. Anyway, we don't release anybody from this camp for security reasons."

His answer was very clear in my mind, "This NKVD operation had to remain secret for as long as possible. The released men would go home and talk."
This was as much as I could do to help them. I didn't see them anymore, but sometimes I thought about what had happened to them.

As Captain Komov promised, we were under his direct supervision and he treated us with utmost respect. As we were promised, we were receiving two hot meals every day. At lunchtime and for supper we could eat in the camp cafeteria, or we were allowed to bring home a large piece of dark bread and a flask full of soup made with chunks of fat pork meat and potatoes. It was enough for all three of us. After several years of poor diet we began to fatten up. And we had so much bread that we were giving some to my aunt for my little cousins; later she taught us how to make *kvass*, a Russian homemade sour-sweet drink made from dry bread, yeast, and sugar.

Giulio was staying in the apartment and did all the housekeeping chores. Occasionally he had to deal with the Soviet soldiers who came to the apartments in search of alcohol or other loot. He usually offered them a cup of tea, which some of them accepted. But most of them were asking for alcohol. One day Giulio almost jokingly offered one soldier a small bottle of *Eau de Cologne* that we found in our neighbors' apartment. He said to him that this was the only alcohol he had. To his surprise the soldier opened the bottle, took a sip from it, and left the apartment happy with his find.

To keep Giulio safe from these unexpected visitors, we taught him to say in Russian: "*Moya zhena secretar v NKVD Lagerye*," which means: "My wife is a secretary in the NKVD camp." This helped him on several occasions with some more aggressive soldiers. But as time passed, there were fewer and fewer transient Soviet troops and unexpected visitors were becoming rare.

In the NKVD camp we met the doctor's assistant, Zina, who arrived there first and was taking care of a dispensary while waiting for the doctor to arrive. Since most of her patients were German men, she often needed our assistance in translating their complaints and in communicating with them. She became very friendly with us and came often to visit us in our apartment.

She was a very pleasant, cheerful, and talkative woman in her middle twenties. Her round face was accentuated by puffy rosy cheeks, a turned-up short nose, and smiling fleshy lips. Her head was attached so close to her short, robust, and plump body

that only the military collar of her uniform was able to define her neck.

She complained that she hadn't seen her husband since they were both drafted and assigned to different military units. "I rarely receive letters from him. Probably, I will divorce him after the war because I barely remember him. During the war I met a very nice doctor with whom I worked for a long time and we fell in love. We write to each other often and I hope to marry him after returning home."

Zina liked Giulio and told me that I was lucky to find such a fine young man. She gave me advice, "Try your best to make him happy; don't lose him." She presented herself as an expert in marriage, although she hadn't lived with her husband for several years. She counseled me to stay attractive and to make our apartment more attractive, "Cover all those boxes with some fabric, even with bed sheets if you don't have anything else. It will make them look like little tables. Rearrange the items in the room once in a while, and make some curtains for the windows. Men appreciate comfort and they like to live in a pleasant looking place."

I remember one funny thing about Zina that she confided in me. "I don't wear any underwear! Not even panties because I need ventilation under this heavy uniform." I couldn't keep from telling this to Giulio, who couldn't believe that she was so hot even during the winter. And we laughed with him every time he told me jokingly about Zina's need for ventilation.

In the middle of February, or maybe a little bit earlier, new chief, *Podpolkovnik*[10] Kozhevnikov, arrived at the NKVD camp; everybody called him simply *Podpolkovnik*. Right from the first days of his arrival in the camp, he met my mother and me at our workplace. He treated us with respect and never asked us any questions about why we were in Germany or anything about our political past.

With *Podpolkovnik* a long awaited doctor for the dispensary also arrived. Her name was Lyudmila Larionovna[11] and she was *Podpolkovnik's* mistress. They both were transferred from the same NKVD unit stationed somewhere near Berlin. It became known much later that their NKVD unit was involved in some kind of a scandal connected to the ransacking of a German bank and to the disappearance of a large amount of gold coins.

Podpolkovnik was a tall, solidly built man in his fifties. He maintained a dignified posture and kept his head high, giving him an air of self-confidence, dignity, and superiority reflecting not only his rank but also his personality. He was an educated and well-mannered man and he appreciated these traits in other people.

He made the habit of coming once in a while to our apartment to talk with my mother, Giulio, and me. He liked to have conversations of a cultural nature, where he was able to show off his knowledge of literature, art, and music. He respected my mother, with whom he talked about the works of classical Russian poets, writers, and playwrights, surprisingly not about contemporary Soviet writers.

With Giulio, with my help in translating, he had conversations about Italian painters, sculptors, and, of course, about Italian operas. Sometimes Giulio, who had a very pleasant voice and knew many arias from popular and famous Italian operas, was singing some passages for him. This common cultural interest established a mutual respect between *Podpolkovnik* and us, especially with Giulio and my mother.

He never spoke about politics, never asked us about our reasons for being in Germany, or about my father, and we didn't volunteer this information. However, he

asked Giulio to tell him about how he became a prisoner of war in Germany.

Podpolkovnik also encouraged his mistress, Lyudmila Larionovna, to spend her free time with us. She told my mother, "*Podpolkovnik* always complains that the education I received at the medical institute was limited to medical science. He told me that it is good for me to be in the company of educated persons like you, Antonina Gavriylovna, from whom I can learn things that I missed in my education in school and in the institute."

As she was saying this, I thought, but didn't tell her, that maybe he also wanted her to spend her free time with us for another very personal reason—to keep her from being too much in the company of the younger NKVD officers, whom he probably felt to be potential rivals considering his, hers, and their age.

Lyudmila Larionovna was a very attractive young woman in her late twenties. She was drafted during the war as a doctor before finishing her internship in a hospital by speeding up her graduation from the medical institute. She had blond hair, blue eyes, fair complexion, and very fine facial features of the northern Russian type. She had a tall, slim figure that was accentuated by a well-fitted uniform, a tight skirt and a jacket. She was not as sophisticated as *Podpolkovnik*, but she had a good cheerful personality and got along well with people.

After she became more familiar with us, she confided that she met *Podpolkovnik* on her first assignment and since then he was able to transfer her anywhere he was transferred to. Although he was married, he had promised to divorce his wife and to marry her after the war when they returned home. She genuinely believed him.

Toward the end of February another high-ranking officer, *Polkovnik*[12] Stepanov, arrived, and under his command the camp began to fill up quickly with newly captured German men, whom we had to register in a hurry, as if there was some kind of a deadline to be met. The three of us were working from eight o'clock in the morning, going home for about one hour for lunch, and on our return working until seven in the evening. In addition, we were kept several times during the week to work until midnight.

I remember one episode well that happened on February 23, 1945, on the day of my mother's fiftieth birthday. The camp at that time was filled to its capacity and new men were still arriving. Although the final destination and the day of departure had been kept secret, somehow it became known to the captured men that they would soon be deported to the Soviet Union. Therefore, on that day *Polkovnik* Stepanov gave an order to keep the detainees locked up all day in their barracks, and a large number of guards with guns were posted along the barbwire fence. Security that night was also very strict because it was expected that some men might try to escape during the night.

Captain Komov asked Zhenya and me to work late that night to register those men who were brought to the camp that day late in the afternoon. It was not the first time that we had to work at night, but this time all of them had to be processed in a hurry to be included with the rest of the captured German men in the first group scheduled to depart very early the next morning.

My mother was allowed to go home on time because she was the oldest. Before leaving she told me, "I will bake the birthday cake. Please return home as soon as you finish. We will wait for you to celebrate my birthday."

When Zhenya and I finished registering the last man, we hurried up to go home. But the door of the building was locked and the guard told us, "It's *Polkovnik* Stepanov's

order not to let any man out of the camp tonight. You have to remain in the building until tomorrow morning."

We both became very upset. I was concerned that my mother and Giulio were waiting for me to celebrate my mother's birthday and would worry if I didn't return home. Zhenya had three children who were home with her elderly mother. She was worrying that they would be afraid not knowing what happened to their mother and would cry if she didn't return home.

Since we couldn't go home, we went to have something to eat in the cafeteria that was in the same building. We sat at a table close to the one where Captain Komov was eating. I was so upset that I couldn't touch my food and began to cry, and Zhenya was comforting me.

Captain Komov came to our table and asked, "What happened? Why are you crying?"

We told him that the guard told us that there was a curfew and we had to stay in the building until tomorrow morning. I begged him, "I have to go home tonight. I cannot stay here." And I explained, "Today is my mother's fiftieth birthday and she and Giulio are waiting for me to celebrate it. I am afraid if I don't come home, Giulio will come to the camp to look for me and he could be shot because of the curfew."
Zhenya explained that her children would be afraid and would cry if she didn't come home.

Captain Komov apologetically said, "I know that there is a curfew tonight. But I was not informed that you have to remain here all night." And he added with indignation, "How it is possible not to allow the employees to return home at night without warning them ahead of time?" Then he told us, "All right, let's finish our supper. I will take care of it. Olga, stop crying. You will go home for such an important occasion. And you, Zhenya, stop worrying. Your children will have their mother home tonight."

When we finished eating Captain Komov told us, "Come with me." He ordered the guard at the door to let us go out with him and led us to the back gate, the one that was the closest to the street leading to our apartments.

It was a very dark cloudy night and as we approached the gate the guard called, "Stop! Who is there? The password!" We stopped.

"I am Captain Komov. Do you know me?" he asked.

The guard didn't answer and Captain continued, "I just finished my work in the office. I don't know the password yet. I need to let my interpreters go home. They live only a few buildings away from this gate."

The guard replied, "There is a curfew tonight. It is *Polkovnik* Stepanov's order not to let any man leave the camp."

"I know that," calmly replied Captain Komov. "But they are not men, they are women and they have to go home. I am taking full responsibility for this and ordering you to let them go through the gate."

The guard hesitated for a few seconds, then ordered, "Approach slowly." As we came closer, he shined the flashlight in Captain's Komov face and checked the insignia of his rank. Reassured that he was his superior, he shined the light in our faces to ascertain that we were indeed women, and only then agreed to let us go through the gate.

"Be careful," Captain Komov warned us. "Stop if there is a guard outside. I will

wait for a few minutes here at the gate, just in case. Good night."

"Good night, Captain Komov," we answered. "Thank you!" And we walked quickly but cautiously, being afraid to encounter another guard. We got safely to our apartment, and I took a deep breath and said "Good night" to Zhenya, who lived farther on in a *Volksdeutsche* apartment building.

I was right; Giulio was almost ready to go out to look for me. Luckily, my mother, who was always cautious and afraid of everything, kept him from leaving. The three of us celebrated my mother's fiftieth birthday and Giulio wished her many more birthdays together with us.

That evening we were very grateful to Captain Komov for being so kind to us. We explained to Giulio what Captain Komov had told us about himself: that he was not an NKVD agent, but a high-ranking bureaucrat with expertise in labor allocation in the People's Commissariat of Industry and Labor,[13] and that he was assigned temporarily to the NKVD for this particular operation of allocating the de¬ported German men according to specific categories to various parts of the Soviet Union for the reconstruction of the cities and industry.

The next morning when we came to work, the camp was empty. The captured men had been transported to the railroad station and loaded into freight cars during the night; the infamous operation was done under the cover of darkness. In the camp only those German men who performed some work in the camp were left. Among them I saw Kiklas, a young man who had worked before with Giulio in the telephone workshop at the *Presswerke*.

Kiklas told me, "I was lucky to know where to find at the *Presswerke* all the electrical and telephone supplies they needed for the camp. And they kept me to work here as an electrician and a telephone maintenance repairman. I don't know how long I will be able to stay here, but the longer, the better. If they need me, maybe they will not send me to the Soviet Union."

"The same with us," I said. "We were drafted to work for NKVD. Our hope is the same as yours, the longer, the better."

He asked me about Giulio and Bruno. I told him that Bruno had been evacuated by the Germans with the rest of the camp, but that Giulio was in my apartment that night and had remained with me. Kiklas said, "Giulio is a very good young man. All of us at the telephone workshop respected him and Bruno. Say hello to Giulio from me. And tell him that Kramer, who worked with us in the workshop, was killed in the last days before the Soviet Army occupied Laband. He was in the civil defense unit operating a machine gun on the roof of one of the *Presswerke* buildings." And he concluded, "Maybe it was better than being deported to the Soviet Union."

The men that remained in the camp were busy cleaning the barracks, preparing them for the next wave of German men who were expected to be brought in from other parts of the country occupied by the Soviets for processing. We found ourselves temporarily without work.

Captain Komov told my mother and me that after the misunderstanding the night before, he talked to *Polkovnik* Stepanov, who ordered him to move us to the empty apartment in a two- apartment house located very close to the main gate of the NKVD camp. "It might happen many times that one or both of you have to work late at night," explained Captain Komov. "This way you don't have to go home so far from the camp."

He told us that we could have two or three days off for moving and settling down in the new place.

I went home to call Giulio and the three of us went right away to see the apartment. We met the family that lived in the other half of the house. They were allowed to live so close to the NKVD camp because Monsieur Izhorski was an interpreter for the Soviet Army unit stationed in the town of Laband.

We met his wife, mother-in-law, an eighteen-year-old daughter Aileen, and a small son Bernard, who was about five years old. They were Polish by nationality, but they had lived a long time in France and were naturalized French citizens. For some unknown reason they had returned to Poland during the war.

They all spoke French and Polish at home, but Monsieur Izhorski also spoke very well German and learned quickly to speak reasonably well in Russian. His young son Bernard spoke both Polish and French well and, amazingly for his age, he had learned German during the war and learned Russian in a very short time when the Soviet Army occupied Laband. Monsieur Izhorski used a bicycle for getting around the town and many times took his son with him. When we met the Izhorski family, they were very pleased to have us as their neighbors, especially since my mother, Giulio, and I spoke French.

We inspected the new apartment, which had a large kitchen, bathroom with a shower, and two large rooms, all furnished. Giulio made a decision and told me, “This shall be your mother’s bedroom, and that one, ours. Don’t you agree that it is time we have our own bedroom?”

I agreed, although I knew that my mother would have preferred that I share a bedroom with her. But by now we presented Giulio to everybody as my husband and it was natural for us to have our own bedroom.

As we moved to the new apartment, Giulio put on his wedding ring, which before he had kept hidden for fear that the Soviet Army soldiers would take it from him. “Now it is safe to wear it,” he explained. “I hope that living close to the NKVD camp gate there will be no unexpected visits by transient soldiers.” He was convinced that wearing wedding rings was sufficient evidence for others that we were married. For us it was a symbol confirming that in his and my heart and mind we really were married.

After the several days that Captain Komov gave us to move to the new apartment, we resumed our work in the NKVD camp. Giulio had a big job ahead moving the coal from the basement of the old apartment to the one in the new apartment with the small sled. It took him couple of weeks of hard work, but it needed to be done. After all, the month of March was very cold and no one knew how long we might be living in Laband. It was better to be sure to have enough fuel.

Our living in the apartment so close to the NKVD camp gate made it much easier for *Polkovnik* Stepanov, *Podpolkovnik* Kozhevnikov, Captain Komov, Doctor Lyudmila Larionovna, and the doctor’s assistant, Zina, to come any time for social visits, especially during the long evening hours and on those days when we and they had less work in the camp. It gave them a chance to get away from the military atmosphere and feel relaxed in a home environment. It felt like they adopted the three of us, my mother, Giulio, and me, as their extended family where they could forget their duties and their rank for a while and just to be themselves.

Captain Komov didn’t have as much free time to visit us as the others because

he was the busiest of them all. He was responsible for all the paperwork involved in selecting and assigning the captured German men to the various labor catego¬ries and projects. My mother and I had more contact with him every day in the camp's office. He never made his military rank of captain more important than being a human being, the man named Komov. He knew that he could rely on us to perform well our work. We knew that we could expect understanding and just treatment from him. And this led to mutual respect between us.

For the doctor's assistant, Zina, and for Doctor Lyudmila Larionovna we were the only easily accessible women with whom they could safely talk about themselves and their female interests, which they couldn't share with men. They shared some of their intimate thoughts with us about their relationships with the men in their lives, and about their plans for the future.

Zina treated me, like a younger cousin; she liked to give me her advice and suggestions on how to make Giulio happy. She never stayed for long in our apartment. She would come and go, rarely sitting down, mostly walking from one room to another and talking all the time. She made, however, an exception to accept a cup of tea from Giulio because she enjoyed his gentle manners and the attention he was giving her in serving tea. She asked me once, "Are all Italians so polite and respectful with women, or is it Giulio who has such pleasant a personality?"

Lyudmila Larionovna never came with Zina—one of them had to stay in the camp's dispensary. She was coming to visit us more in the early evening and many times came together with *Podpolkovnik* Kozhevnikov, who encouraged his mistress to spend much of her free time with my mother, as he was saying, "to upgrade her cultural knowledge and manners."

Podpolkovnik Kozhevnikov found us to be listeners with whom he could share and also show-off his cultural knowledge, which he valued probably more than his rank as an NKVD officer. When he came to visit us with his mistress, she had to listen to his discussions either with my mother on Russian literature, or to the exchange of ideas with Giulio on Italian art and opera. On those occasions I observed Lyudmila Larionovna as she sat near him silently admiring her lover's erudite discussions. But one could easily see that she was very conscious of her inability to participate in such conversations.

One day when she was alone with my mother, she asked her, "Do you think, Antonina Gavriylovna, that I could learn all that he wants me to know, so I will not make a bad impression in his circle of friends and colleagues?"

My mother told her, "Of course, my dear, but you should do a lot of reading on those subjects. They are not more difficult than medical science, which you mastered well."

After she got to know us better, she shared some details about her relationship with *Podpolkovnik* and about her aspirations for their future.

Polkovnik Stepanov liked to come for short visits to us, mostly during the days when we didn't have to work, or in the early evening. He always liked to have a drink of Russian *kvass,* which he told us, "Reminded me of my home." He had a less complicated personality than *Podpolkovnik* Kozhevnikov and talked mostly about practical things concerning everyday life. He was more interested than the others in how Giulio and I, being citizens of two different countries, would solve our problem of

remaining together in that very complicated period of history; it was a time when the lives and destiny of human beings had no value and all was subjugated to the despotic rulers, to the aberrations of political ideology, and to the strict rules of wartime.

He was treating Giulio and me almost in a fatherly manner and looked with benevolent eyes on us, the two young people in love. However, he was also concerned about my mother and told me more than once, “Don’t abandon your mother. She might be useful to you in the future.”

Giulio was very surprised that all our previous fears of the NKVD had been much exaggerated. He told me, “Why were you so afraid of the NKVD agents? Look what nice people they are. It is very strange that all these NKVD officers have never asked you anything, or interrogated you about your past, what you did during the war, or about why you happen to be in Germany, or what happened to your father.”

I answered him, “I am very surprised with this too. But there must be some logical explanation. Either they found out all this information from other sources, or they didn’t want to know anything about it, as long as we were serving their needs as interpreters in the NKVD camp. Or because their assignment at that time was to round up as many of the German men as possible and send them to the Soviet Union; it didn’t include us, the Soviet citizens.”

Giulio commented, “No matter what it is, they treat you with respect and make you feel at ease, and they enjoy and appreciate your company.”

“It is true,” I answered. “But it all could change tomorrow. If they received an order to deport all Soviet citizens back home, they would do their duty as diligently as they are doing it now with the German men.”

“Maybe,” answered Giulio, “but if you are right, I don’t want to witness it unless they allow me to go with you.”

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1. NKVD - acronym for *Narodny Kommisariat Vnutrennikh Dyel* [in Russian] - People’s Commissariat of Internal Affairs.
2. Prisoner of war camp [in German]. See chapter “*Presswerke* Laband.”
3. “Oh, the pretty country girl, you are the beauty queen...” [in Italian].
4. My cousins, children of my uncle Igor.
5. Russian custom and spelling of the first name, patrimonial name, and feminine last name.
6. Contraction of party name *Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbaiterpartei* [in German] - National Socialist German Workers’ Party, or the German Nazi Party.
7. SS – acronym for *Schutzstaffel* [in German] - Black Shirts German Nazi Elite Guard.
8. Gestapo - acronym for *Geheime Staatspolizei* [in German] - the German Secret State Police under Nazi regime, operating against political opposition.
9. A region in northeastern France seized by Germany in 1871 and during WW II.
10. Lieutenant-Colonel.
11. Last name could not be recalled.
12. Colonel.
13. Not sure about the exact name of the Commissariat.

Chapter 16

It's Wonderful News!

By Olga Gladky Verro
Also as Remembered by Giulio Verro

One morning, in March 1945 as I got up from the bed, I felt nauseated and ran to the bathroom where Giulio, who always got up before me, was shaving.

"What did I have last night for supper?" I asked him. "I feel like I need to throw up."

Giulio put the razor on the sink and, without saying a word, embraced me and with the soap on his face gave me a long tender kiss. Holding me tight with his face close to mine he looked inquisitively in my eyes and cheerfully announced, "It's wonderful news! Didn't you guess it yet? My dear Lala, we are going to have a baby! It had to be expected; we have been playing the husband-and-wife game for a while."

At that moment my stomach felt really bad and I could squeeze out only a weak smile and say, "I am very, very happy too, my dearest Giulio. At least a part of you will stay with me, if we don't have a chance to remain together."

"Don't talk nonsense," he admonished me sternly. And then with self-confidence added, "This baby will have both mother and father!"

"I wish I could be as optimistic as you are," I replied. "But having your child is the best thing that could have happened to me, no matter how the future will be."

"So far everything is going well," he said in a positive tone of voice. "Let's not spoil our happiness with such sad thoughts."

Giulio paused for a while as if reminiscing about something and said, "I already told you that from the time I was growing up I always liked small children. I loved to play with Fiorina[1] and Iella,[2] my two little cousins. Then, during the time I was in the Air Force, I heard some of my married comrades complaining that they had childless marriages. I never could imagine myself being married and not having children. It would have been a big tragedy for me. Now, at least I know that I don't have to worry that this could happen to me, and I owe it to you, my dearest Lala."

When we told the news to my mother, she commented, "I asked you if you knew what you were doing. Now you have responsibility for a new life."

"Yes, Mama," we replied.

But, as usual, she found something to worry about right away. "Lyalya, you have to see the doctor and check your heart," she told me. "You remember, after you had scarlet fever the doctor diagnosed you with a myocardia complication."

"Mama," I reproached her, "I was seven years old when I had scarlet fever. Since then I never had any problems with my heart."

"Yes, you always had shortness of breath when you ran."

Giulio interfered in our discussion and suggested that, regardless if this condition existed or not, it was a good idea to go and check my health with the doctor.

That week I went to see doctor Lyudmila Larionovna in the dispensary of the

NKVD camp and asked her to check my heart.

"What is the matter with your heart? Does Giulio give you some trouble?" she joked.

"Oh, no!" I replied emphatically. "I really need to know about my heart condition. You see, in my childhood I had scarlet fever and as an after effect of that illness the doctors diagnosed a myocardial complication. The only problem with it was shortness of breath when I ran, walked up a hill or up stairs."

"What happened that you decided to check it now?" she wondered.

"I need to know if this could somehow interfere with childbirth."

"Ah! You are pregnant!" she exclaimed. "Congratulations! How long have you known about it?"

"Only this week, when I started to have nausea in the morning."

"Then you have a long way to wait." She listened to my heart very thoroughly and also examined my lungs and concluded, "I don't see any problems that could interfere with the pregnancy or with the childbirth. You look very healthy to me. If you should have any problems, come and see me. By the way, you may sometimes during pregnancy have the problem of constipation. If this happens eat a lot of boiled potatoes."

"Thank you, thank you, doctor," I said with joy in my voice. "I have to go right away and tell the good news to Giulio and to my mother."

Now Giulio and I considered seriously that it was not enough for him and me to wear the wedding rings and to believe ourselves to be married.[3] It was maybe enough to show it to others, but for all legal purposes, for the civil and military authorities, a marriage certificate issued by the lawful institution was required. Now we needed to be legally married.

I asked Captain Komov to have one morning free. The first place we went to officially register our marriage was Laband's Town Hall now under the Polish government. There we found out that they had the authority to conduct official business only for Polish citizens. The employee told us that they had received an order issued by the Soviet Army authorities prohibiting them from registering marriages between Soviet citizens and persons of any other nationality. He further explained, "In order to register your marriage you have to obtain an official written permission for marriage from the Soviet authorities."

"Where are these Soviet authorities?" we asked him.

"You have to go to the neighboring town of Gliwice,[4] where you can find out if it can be done there."

"Before going all the way to another town," Giulio suggested, "we should try first to see if the priest of the local Catholic church could marry us. A church marriage certificate should be as valid as one from the Town Hall. We have plenty of time to do it this morning." And we went right away to the Catholic church.

It was a very little church built on a top of a small but steep hill, which made it look much taller. A brick sidewalk led to it. By the time we reached its doors, I was short of breath. "Your mother was right," said Giulio. "If we were not walking arm-in-arm, you would have had to stop and rest."

Inside the church we found the priest, an old, short, and skinny man. We saluted him, "*Guten Morgen*,[5] Father!"

"*Guten Morgen*!" he answered and gave us an inquiring look recognizing that we

were not from his parish.

"We came to ask you to marry us," I told him in German.

"Of course, my children," he answered without hesitation and asked, "Are you Catholics?"

"He is an Italian, and he is a Catholic," I replied. "I was baptized as a Russian Orthodox, but it doesn't matter to me in what church I get married."

"A-a-h," said the Father slowly, as he was thinking what he can answer. "I would be very happy to marry you, but I cannot give you a marriage certificate because the Soviet authorities issued an order prohibiting marriages between Soviet citizens and persons of any other nationality."

"What good will it do if we cannot have a document that we are married?" I asked the priest. "If for some reason we would be separated," I pointed to Giulio, "his whole life will be messed up. As a Catholic he could not get married anymore in the church."

"All I could offer you, my children," the priest consoled us, "are my blessings for having good intentions in coming to the House of the Lord to get married." He raised his frail trembling hand and said, "God bless you and protect you. In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Ghost. Amen."

"Amen," Giulio said crossing himself.

"Amen." I repeated after him also crossing myself with the Orthodox cross.

There was nothing else to say and the three of us slowly walked out of the church. The priest accompanied us half-way down on the brick sidewalk, where he stopped and saluted us, "*Auf Widersehen,*[6] my children!"

"*Auf Widersehen*, Father!" we answered and slowly walked down the path. At the bottom of the hill we stopped and looked back at the little church. It was a clear and bright sunny morning and the priest's figure in the black robe was clearly seen against the blue sky. He was still standing on the sidewalk looking at us and his hand was raised.

"Is he waving good-bye, or is he still giving us his blessings?" I asked Giulio.

"We will never know," he answered. "But the old priest was sincere in blessing us in the church. Let's hope that his blessings will help us in our search to remain together."

Giulio and I decided to wait until warmer weather before venturing to Gliwice to look for the Soviet authorities that, we were hoping, could give us a permit for marriage.

Meanwhile Giulio found out that several Italian comrades were coming to the local tavern to hear and exchange news. Most of them had remained with their Polish girlfriends in Laband or in the neighboring villages and towns. One of them had been Cosso, an interpreter in the Italian prisoners of war camp. "It was his luck to be in his Polish girlfriend's house on the night the Germans evacuated the whole camp," Giulio commented. "He treated his fellow Italians so badly during the time they were prisoners of war that he could not safely return to Italy. There were too many men who could bring him to justice. He found himself a Polish girl and got married so he could stay in Poland. They had no problems in getting married."

The other Italians heard that in the town of Gliwice there was a place where all foreigners could register for eventual repatriation to their homelands. "Well," Giulio said, "maybe I should go there to register, just in case we cannot obtain permission to go together to the Soviet Union. It is better to keep all options open. Maybe it would be easier to obtain permission to go together to Italy."

I was surprised to hear this because it was the first time that Giulio had mentioned taking me to Italy. Until that time he was thinking only of going with us to the Soviet Union.

"What about my mother?" I asked.

"I don't know," he replied. "We shall think about it when the time comes."

The spring arrived almost unexpectedly with warm days and good weather. As the snow melted, I discovered a flowerbed under the windows of our apartment. Instead of flowers I planted a few pea seeds, which germinated quickly and I was hoping to have a good crop. Giulio saw the bounty of dandelions budding everywhere on the grassy patches and he and I went to collect the young tender plants. He introduced us to the bitter tasting salad from raw and cooked greens. I liked it, but it didn't have much success with my mother. One day the doctor Lyudmila Larionovna came to visit us when Giulio was preparing the dandelion salad; she tasted it and found it to be delicious and healthy.

Now she was visiting us often because the number of German men brought to the camp had diminished considerably and she took care mostly of the enlisted military men. We also worked only when the new groups of German men were brought in. This gave Giulio and me time to do many things together.

My mother and I discovered sorrel on the grassy patches; it is a sour green herb that is commonly used in Ukraine to make a soup. We collected it with Giulio and he liked our Ukrainian specialty very much.

I found a recipe for a soup with the young snow green pea pods. When the peas began to fill in the pods I decided to make a surprise for Giulio and, one day when he went to collect the edible spring flowers and herbs, I quickly put the water in the pot with a few potatoes cut in cubes. Then I collected the young green pea pods and cut them in small pieces, as was instructed in the recipe, added them in the pot, and fried some chopped onions as a condiment. Voila, the soup was ready to eat when Giulio returned home.

All satisfied with my culinary skills, I poured the soup in the dishes expecting compliments. But the first spoon revealed a disaster. The pods' skin was hard and stringy and we had to spit the fiber out. When we read the recipe with Giulio, he laughed and said that it called for "green snow pea pods," which are another kind of a pea plant with tender pods. But I didn't know that such peas even existed. Giulio forgave me and said, "You will learn; I will teach you how to cook."

From my aunt Antonina Yulyevna we found out that many *Volksdeutsch*e were going to the forest to collect mushrooms. Well, Giulio and I went to collect them too. We had two large bags and found some mushrooms that I knew were edible. Then we came to a grassy clearing that was completely covered with light-brown mushrooms on skinny stems, which I didn't know. We decided that we would collect them and put them in a pile and take some to show somebody who knew them. If they were edible, we would return to pick up the rest of them. They happened not only to be edible, but also according to my aunt's neighbor, were especially good to marinate. We rushed back into the forest to the clearing, but to our surprise, the pile of mushrooms had disappeared; somebody had taken them all. Only a few broken pieces remained on the ground. We were very disappointed and had to be content with what we had collected before.

My aunt also told us that her neighbors were going to the neighboring villages

with whatever they had—clothes, shoes, and knickknacks—to barter for any kind of food. Giulio and I decided to also go into the villages to see what we could find. My mother selected some women's clothes that we got from our next-door neighbors who left us the keys to their apartment. And one day when I was free from work in the NKVD camp we went to the villages. We didn't have much luck. We were trying to find some eggs and chickens, but all that the peasants were offering us were potatoes or big turnips.

Finally, one peasant woman liked a dress we had and offered to barter it for a young skinny rooster. I said to Giulio, "We have plenty of dry bread leftovers, we can fatten him up." So we returned home with the rooster. My mother took charge of feeding him and kept him in the basement. But he was a nervous bird and every morning woke us and our neighbors with his high pitched cock-a-doodle-doo. This prompted my mother to cook him sooner, before he grew to his full size.

On those days that my mother and I were working in the NKVD camp, Giulio took over the food preparation. He often went to the forest to collect mushrooms or edible flowers, such as violets and dandelions, and herbs for *minestra di erbette*, as he called an Italian soup made from spring herbs, which tasted and smelled deliciously refreshing. And when the mushrooms he found were not sufficient to fry, Giulio prepared a tasty sauce to pour over boiled potatoes.

One day, when we returned home from work, we found Giulio very upset. He told us that he had gone to the forest and found a dead elderly couple lying next to each other in the bushes. They looked like they had been shot and fallen together on the ground while holding each other's hands.

My mother and I made an assumption right away that the Soviet soldiers were now searching for German men hiding in the forest. We begged Giulio not to venture in the forest any more. But Giulio rejected our idea, believing that it probably was a case of local revenge, or just plain robbery that could have been committed without fear of being caught in those unsettled times. However, he vaguely promised not to go there in the near future.

Sometime later after this incident we finished our work in the NKVD camp sooner than usual and came home very early in the afternoon. Giulio was not home and I thought that he had gone into town at the Laband's tavern to hear the news about repatriation from his Italian comrades. He usually didn't stay there very long since most of his comrades lived in other towns or villages and had to walk several miles to be back before it was dark. Walking on the open road at night was not very safe, although there was no declared curfew by the occupying Soviet authorities.

After several hours passed and Giulio didn't return, both my mother and I began to worry about what could have happened to him. I went to our neighbors to find out if *Madame* Izhorsky knew where he had gone. But she was able only to tell me that he had left shortly after we went back to the camp after lunch. This made me worry even more, for he had been absent from home much longer than I had estimated before.

"What could have happened to him?" I was asking my mother. And we both were guessing the worst scenarios, "Probably he was picked up to be deported as a German and brought to the NKVD camp here."

"Well," I reasoned, "then it would not be very difficult to have him released because everybody knows him as my husband and as an Italian."

As the time passed by, our speculations about what could have happened to him

were becoming more ominous. Even *Madame* Izhorski began to worry and came over several times to suggest that her husband as an interpreter for the Soviet military authorities in Laband could find out if they knew anything about him. And she added cautiously, “This is just in case Giulio has disappeared.”

I was sitting near the window, from which I could see the whole street, and after hearing her words began to cry. Then Zina came and asked what happened.

“Maybe,” she suggested, “if Giulio does not return before dark, you should go to see Captain Komov and ask his advice.”

At that moment I saw at the far end of the street a familiar figure walking very fast toward our house. I jumped up screaming, “He is here! Giulio is here!” And I ran outside toward him. I was so overwhelmed with joy to see him that I continued to cry from happiness.

A few feet before I reached him, Giulio stopped and extended a big bunch of white daisies toward me. “Look, Lala, what I found for you! Aren’t they beautiful?"

I took the flowers and embraced Giulio right there in the middle of the street. My mother, Zina, and *Madame* Izhorski were standing outside the house waiting to hear where Giulio had been all this time.

“What happened?” he asked. “Why are you crying?”

“Because I am happy to see you. I was worrying about what happened to you. Where have you been all day long?” I asked him through the tears.

“In the forest,” he answered innocently. And then he continued to describe the beauty of nature, all enchanted with his excursion to the forest, “You remember that clearing where we collected those mushrooms and someone took them? Well, it was a sea of white daisies today. I wished that you were there with me to admire it. I couldn’t stop collecting them for you.”

As we came close to the house, my mother asked him in an anxious voice, “Where have you been all this time? We didn’t know what to think about what happened to you.”

“I was in the forest collecting these flowers for Lala,” he repeated it now as if he was justifying his actions. He looked at all the women standing there and asked with annoyance in his voice, “What is the matter with all of you? Why are you all so upset?”

“Do you realize how long you have been out?” I asked. “We came home right after you left. It was more then five hours that you were gone. I thought we agreed that you would not go in the forest anymore after you found that dead couple there.”

Zina was standing by and I told her in Russian, “Could you imagine that this ‘*durnoy’* man was putting himself in danger collecting flowers for me!”

Then I looked at Giulio and shaking my head in a sign of disapproval repeated to him, “Giulio, you are ‘*durnoy’, ‘durnoy’* young man, to take such risk for a bunch of flowers!”

“The bunch of flowers for the girl I love!” he corrected me. Then I saw Giulio suddenly become very upset and he asked me bitterly showing that he was offended, “Are you telling me that I am ‘*durak*’? I know that it means ‘stupid.’”

“No, Giulio, no!” I tried to embrace him, but he pushed me away. “No, no, these two words do not mean the same thing. Please, Giulio, listen to me. ‘*Durnoy*’ in Russian is used to mean ‘naughty’ in a playful way. It means one who does something without thinking much about. It is not used in an offensive way like the word ‘*durak*’ would be

used."

Giulio was not convinced with my explanation and all upset walked out of the house. We saw him pacing nervously back and forth on the sidewalk. Zina could not figure out why Giulio got upset because we had spoken in French. I told her, "It is our fist quarrel since we met each other."

Zina comforted me as an expert in resolving marital quarrels, "Don't you worry, tonight in bed he shall forgive you everything."

I was very upset with my inability to convince Giulio that I didn't mean to offend him and that it had resulted from a difficulty to explain in French to an Italian the meaning of the two very similar sounding Russian words.

It was becoming dark outside. I set the table for supper and placed a jar with the bunch of daisies in the middle of the table. Then I dared to go out and call Giulio to come in to eat. The cool evening air and brisk walk calmed him down. I took Giulio's hand and led him inside.

Conversation at the table was somewhat tense and both of us were trying to find something to talk about that was remote from what had happened that afternoon. My mother attempted several times to remind Giulio not to venture to the forest anymore, but I would not allow her to continue the topic further. I was not sure, if he finally accepted my explanation of the semantic difference in those two Russian words. It was not until we went to bed and Giulio gave me his goodnight kiss and invited me to cuddle close to him in our narrow bed that I knew our first quarrel was finally over.

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1. Daughter of Mario Cortopassi. See "Franchini's Family Tree."
2. Daughter of Dina and Enrico Macchi. See "Franchini's Family Tree."
3. See chapters "The Prince of My Dreams" and "Chance, Destiny, or the Will of God."
4. The German name for the town is Gleiwitz; it is located in the region of Oberschlesia that was annexed to Germany during WW II and became Polish again with the Polish name Gliwice when the Germans retreated from the Soviet Army.
5. "Good morning!" [in German].
6. "Good-bye" [in German].

Chapter 17

Giulio's Watch

By Olga Gladky Verro
Also as Remembered by Giulio Verro

The spring finally was in full control and the warm weather was here to stay. Giulio and I decided that it was time for us to go to the town of Gleiwitz[1] to see if we could find the Soviet authorities that could give us authorization to get married.[2] Giulio also wanted to get registered with the Polish Red Cross for repatriation as an Italian ex-prisoner of war. He felt that we should try all available options, just in case one of them would not work.

We got up very early in the morning to have a good start because there was no public transportation yet from Laband[3] to Gleiwitz. We had to walk probably more then four or five kilometers each way[4] and we took the shortest route on an unpaved country road that wound up through open fields on gently rolling hills.

Some fields were already green with the new crops pushing through the soil in parallel rows. Some fields were still dark, freshly plowed, and emanating the pungent smell of raw earth. And some fields were uncultivated and covered with wild grass and field flowers that filled the air with the sweet smell of nectar and a buzzing concert of the busy bees. In the distance, far from the road, we could see some isolated farmhouses and farmers tilling the soil.

Giulio and I walked arm-in-arm feeling the closeness of each other's young bodies and our hearts and souls that were in full harmony with the awakening of nature that surrounded us. We felt immensely happy, oblivious to the problems that we could encounter in our desire to remain together forever.

Giulio was walking at a quick pace and to keep up with him I needed the support of his arm. Once in a while I would ask him to stop to take a rest and I would sit on a road marker stone placed at the edge of the road and he would sit on the grass.

We hardly noticed when we arrived at the outskirts of a town. Giulio looked at his Longines[5] watch, which he valued so much that he didn't even consider bartering it for food when he was hungry in the prisoner of war camp.

"We made it in record time," he said. "I had estimated that it would probably take us more than two hours to get here."

With some help from the local people, we found the way to the center of town where we could find all the offices of the Polish Town Government and probably those of the Occupational Soviet Army.

On the Central Square of the town Giulio spotted a group of men dressed in Italian military uniforms. As he approached them, they greeted him with boisterous cheers. He asked if they knew anything about the repatriation and they told him that he should go to the neighboring town of Katowitz[6] to the Office of the Polish Red Cross where all of them had already registered. They didn't know when the repatriation would

take place, but because there was no means to communicate to everybody when it would occur, they suggested that Giulio visit that office once in a while and keep in touch with the other Italians.

Then we went to the Town Hall to find out if there were some Soviet authorities in town who could issue us an authorization for marriage. Several Polish employees gathered to give us their advice.

"You can inquire at the Soviet Army Headquarters in town," one of them told us.

"It is very unlikely that they have the authority to do this," another employee said, "because they are concerned only with military matters."

"You absolutely shouldn't get involved with the Soviet military authority," the third one agreed with the second and warned, "You never know how they will react to such request."

"I agree with most of what my colleagues have told you," said the fourth employee, who was patiently listening to the others, "but I advise you to go to Warsaw where there is already Soviet Consulate, which deals with civilian matters of Soviet citizens. There, someone might have the authority to issue such documents."

"He is right."

"That's the place to go!"

"Yes," agreed the others.

Giulio and I also agreed that his advice was the most logical and practical for us to follow. We expressed our gratitude to all of them for their help and they wished us "Good luck."

When we left the Town Hall, Giulio again joined the group of his fellow Italians. From them he learned that they were making their living by buying, selling, or bartering all kinds of stuff at the big market where one could find food and all kinds of merchandise. The market was in the neighboring large town of Katowitz, which could be reached by the streetcar from Gleiwitz; they explained where to take that streetcar in town. In saluting them, Giulio promised to see them soon at the market. Because I didn't understand anything the Italians had told him, Giulio translated to me in French what it was all about.

We left the town of Gleiwitz in a good mood, feeling that even we didn't find the place where we could get an authorization for marriage; we had received good advice that we might find it in Warsaw. We had plenty to discuss—all the possibilities of how we could arrange our trip to the Polish capital. We also found out where the Polish Red Cross was located to register Giulio, which provided us an alternative if we could not go to the Soviet Union together. Giulio liked the idea of going to the market in Katowitz to barter or sell the stuff that we had from our next-door neighbor's apartment.

We were walking arm-in-arm cheerfully talking and sharing with each other the many ideas that were popping in our minds and we didn't even notice when we were almost halfway to Laband. As we were climbing up a hill on the winding country road, Giulio said, "I can feel that you have been short of breath for some time. This morning you rested sitting on the road marker stone and I sat on the grass on the top of the next hill." He looked at his watch and said, "It is not too late, the sun is still high. We could rest in the same place again."

As we reached the top of the hill the sun was straight in front of us, blinding our eyes and making it hard to see far ahead. Giulio stopped and gave me a kiss saying,

“This is a reward for reaching the highest point that we had to climb. From here the road is mostly downhill.” I squeezed my eyes and used the palm of my hand to protect them from the sunrays. Shielding the sun I was searching for the road marker stone on which I had rested that morning.

The flat top of the hill was very large, with a slight slope on the other side. There, against the background of the sunlit sky, I saw two Soviet Army soldiers, one standing with a gun across his shoulder and the other sitting on the road marker stone holding the gun upright in front of him.

“Giulio,” I warned him, “slow down. Look ahead. Do you see those Soviet soldiers there?”

Giulio protected his eyes from the sun and looked in that direction. “Yes. I see them. Are you afraid of them? You can speak Russian. Until now the soldiers have not done any harm to you or to me.”

“Yes,” I replied, “but we never encountered them in the middle of nowhere with nobody else around.” I freed my arm from his arm and added, “I am scared. We better not walk so cozy close to each other.”

“Try to act natural and don’t show them that you are afraid of them,” he suggested.

“What are they doing there?” I asked.

“Maybe they are resting like we intended to do," he said.

At that time we reached the curve on the road from which we could see the slope of the hill on the left of the two Soviet soldiers. Sitting and lying on the grass in all kinds of resting po¬sitions was a group of about twenty-five to thirty men, and from a distance it looked like they were dressed in civilian clothing.

“Giulio,” I said, “those are German men whom those soldiers are probably bringing to the NKVD camp in Laband.”

“It seems that you may be right,” he replied.

“I should have brought my NKVD camp pass with me,” I said with regret. “It would have been helpful to me now.”

As we were walking toward them, we could see that both soldiers were watching us. Then, as we came closer, the soldier who was sitting on the stone got up and stepped out on the road holding his gun in front of him and blocking the road, as if he wanted us to stop.

Giulio said to me, “Walk, walk normally. Don’t stop now. When we are close enough that they can hear us, salute them in Russian. If they ask about me, tell them that I had to register with the Red Cross as an Italian ex-prisoner of war for the repatriation and that you came as my interpreter.”

When we were about four or five meters from the soldiers, the one that was standing on the road gave us a command, “Documents!”

As we slowly approached him, I greeted them in Russian, “*Dobry dyen,*[7] soldiers!”

“Documents!” he commanded without answering my greeting.

When I came close to him, I could smell alcohol on his breath. “Uh-oh, I thought, this soldier is drunk.”

I opened my purse, pulled out my Soviet passport and handed it to him saying, “I am an interpreter. I was accompanying this Italian man who was a prisoner of war...”

The soldier interrupted me, “A-a-h, you are R-r-ussian!” And he emitted a string of

swearing, calling me all kinds of bad names. “Wa-alk-ing arm-in-arm with a for-r-eigner! Kissing him! Our R-r-ussian boys are not good enough for you!”

“I am an interpreter,” I protested. “He is an Italian prisoner of war. He had to register at the Red Cross in Gleiwitz.” Giulio was holding his Italian Air Force Identification Card in his hand and I was pointing to it and repeating, “He is an Italian prisoner of war.”

The drunken soldier swore again and said to me defiantly, “We don’t need you. We have our own in-ter-r-pr-reter.” He turned toward the group of Germans and called, “Hey, Fritz, come here!” The man in a worn-out German uniform got up and was coming toward us.

Meanwhile, the soldier told me, “We will do our own questioning of this man.” He handed back my passport and commanded, “Get away from here! March, march!”

“I will wait for him,” I replied.

The soldier became angry and raised his gun, threatening to hit me with it and screamed, “Go away! Go away!”

Giulio gently pushed me toward the road and surprisingly calmly said to me in French, “Go, go. Wait for me at the bottom of the hill.”

I began to walk slowly, turning my head once in a while. On a large curve on the road I stopped and turned to see what the soldier was doing with Giulio. I saw instead that the soldier was still watching me and, seeing that I stopped, he fired the gun in my direction. Lucky for me, he was drunk and completely out of target.

Although I got scared, I resumed walking at the same slow pace as before. And I thought, “Either he is trying to scare me and shooting in the air, or he is drunk and cannot shoot straight.” I walked a dozen meters and stopped again.

As soon as I turned to look back, I heard one bullet hit the marker-stone on my right, bounce from it, and land somewhere behind me. The second bullet went into the grass and the impact spattered clods of earth and grass in all directions. The third bullet hit the marker-stone ahead of me again and bounced back passing so close to me that I got really scared. “He is really aiming at me!” I thought and began to walk faster until I was sure that I was out of his sight. Only then did I slow down.

After walking almost to the bottom of the hill, I sat on the marker-stone and decided to wait there to see if the soldier would release Giulio, or if they would take him with the Germans wherever they are bringing them. I thought, “It is possible that they are taking them to the NKVD camp in Laband, where all officers know Giulio well. That is the best thing that could happen to him because I am sure that Polkovnik Stepanov would release him.”

Then I imagined the worst scenario. “What would happen to him if the soldiers are taking those Germans somewhere else? I was so concentrated on talking to the soldier that I did not notice if all captured Germans wore civilian clothing, or if some wore military uniforms. Maybe they are prisoners of war and they are bringing them to another camp where the Soviet Army and not the NKVD are in charge. They would never let him go from there and he might just end up being deported with the Germans to reconstruct the Soviet Union and I would lose him forever.” I began to cry.

Through the tears I was looking up the hill and hoping that Giulio would appear on the road. I was watching and waiting and lost my perception of time; it seemed to me to be an eternity. My hope to see Giulio free was disappearing with every minute of

waiting.

Then I saw two women coming down the road. I thought, “They should have seen what happened there.” As they came close to me, I got up and asked, “Did you see on top of the hill the Soviet soldiers questioning a young man?”

“We were so scared because we heard the shots, and we walked so fast that we didn’t even look at them,” said one woman.

“They probably shot him!” said the other one. And they walked away in a hurry.

A panic took over me and I could not think straight what I should do. Like in a trance, I followed the women on the road toward Laband. Slowly I regained some control of myself and decided to wait until the whole group of Germans led by the Soviet soldiers came down the hill. I thought, “They cannot just walk across the fields,” and reassured myself, “they must come down this road. At the outskirts of Laband I would hide somewhere and wait as they passed by... I need to hide because if that drunken soldier sees me, for sure he will shoot at me again.”

Once in a while I was looking back on the road to see if the Soviet soldiers with the captured Germans were coming down the hill. I was afraid to see them before I reached the first house where I could hide. I began to run, thinking, “I better ask people in one of those houses if they would let me stay with them until the soldiers go by.”

When I got to the first house, I knocked at the door but nobody answered. At the second house an elderly woman opened the door. I was out of breath from running and was breathing heavily as I tried to speak to her in German, “Please...There are Soviet soldiers bringing captured German men. I am afraid that they captured my fiancé. Could you allow me to wait in your home until they go by?”

The woman called her husband and I repeated my plea to him.

“You are not German,” he said.

“No. I am Ukrainian and my fiancé is Italian,” I explained and, being afraid that he would not let me in, I began to cry.

“Do you want me to show you my documents?” I asked him.

“No, no. Come in,” he said. “I know that they grab men on the streets.”

“*Danke*, *danke schoöne*!”[8] I thanked him entering the room.

They invited me to sit on the chair and the woman offered me some water. I asked the woman if I could sit near the window where I could see the road coming from the hill.

As I waited, I told my hosts about our encounter with the Soviet soldiers, how they detained Giulio, how they chased me away, and how one of them was shooting at me because I was trying to see what they were doing to my fiancé. “That’s why I am trying to hide from them now,” I explained. “I don’t know how the drunken soldier would behave if he sees that I am waiting again.”

My hosts were sympathetic to me and the woman was trying to calm me down with kind words.

I didn’t have to wait for long until I saw a man running very fast down the hill. “Giulio!” I screamed, jumping up and going out the door in a hurry. Crying now from joy, I ran up the hill toward him. I was soon out of breath; my heart was pounding as if it wanted to jump out of my chest, and I had to slow down, but I continued to walk until the moment when Giulio and I threw ourselves in each other’s arms. Holding him tightly and breathing heavily, I was only able to repeat through my tears of joy, “Oh, Giulio,

Giulio, Giulio..."

And he was answering, "I am here, I am here, I am here..."

Only after we were sure that indeed we were again together were we able to release our embrace. Giulio pulled out his handkerchief, dried out my tears, and said, "We both need to rest, but only for a short time. We better get out of here quickly before they come down with the Germans and before that drunken soldier changes his mind."

"Don't worry," I said, "let's walk quickly; we will rest in the second house over there where the elderly couple allowed me to wait for you." And we began to walk fast. Giulio was holding my hand tightly as if he was making sure that I would not suddenly disappear.

"I really thought I would never see you again," I said.

"And I was afraid that the drunken soldier would kill you when he was shooting at you!" Giulio said, kissing my hand. "I knew from the tone of the soldier's voice that he was very upset with you, but I couldn't figure out why. I understood all that you said to him and there was nothing that could offend him."

"He saw that we were walking arm-in-arm and that you kissed me when we reached the top of the hill," I explained. "He called me many offensive names because I had selected a foreigner as my lover. His exact words were: 'Our Russian boys are not good enough for you?!' He got upset even more when I was insisting that I was an interpreter."

"That's why he called his German interpreter," reasoned Giulio, "he didn't believe that you would tell him the truth about me."

"We were lucky," I said, "that we were not wearing our wedding rings. Who knows how he would have reacted to that."

"For sure he would have taken them," replied Giulio. "Now that I understand why he was angry, we better walk fast before they order those Germans to march again."

We reached the house where I was hiding before and indeed the old couple was waiting for us at the door and invited us in.

The hosts were now very friendly and told us to wait in their house until the soldiers with the captured German men would pass by their house. The woman offered us some water and asked Giulio to tell them what happened to him after I was gone and why the soldiers had finally released him.

"Yes," I said, "tell us why the soldier kept you for so long."

And Giulio recounted what happened after the drunken soldier fired the last three shots at me.

We listened to Giulio's story, which, of course, he was telling in French and I was translating it into German for our hosts. But when I heard that the wife was explaining some words to her husband in Polish, I apologized that I didn't speak Polish, but began to include some words in Ukrainian, which they could understand.

"When you finally started to walk fast," Giulio told us, "the other soldier said something very calmly to the drunken one and he put down the gun. The German interpreter was standing close to me. The drunken soldier took my military card and a camp pass and gave them to the German, ordering him to translate.

"I said to the German interpreter, pointing at myself, 'Italian *Gefangene.*'[9] But the German looked at my documents as if he was studying them very carefully. And he was stalling to give an answer, as if he wanted to impress the soldier with his competent

interpretation. Then he looked at me with disdain and turning to the soldier said very authoritatively, '*Italiansky Fascist.*'[10]

"I grabbed from his hands my military card and my camp pass and showed the soldier my photograph. Pointing with my finger at the five-pointed star on the collar of my uniform jacket, firmly said to him, '*Nyet*, *Fascist! Italyansky radiotelegraphist*.'[11] Then I pointed at the German interpreter, almost touching his military uniform where the epaulets were torn out, and said as firmly as he did, '*Nyemetzky Fascist*!'[12] Then, showing the soldier my prisoner of war camp pass and pointing at myself, I said as clearly as I could in Russian, '*Italyansky voyennoplenny lager document*.[13]

"The other soldier, who was listening to all of this without interfering, calmly said something to the drunken soldier. He must have told him something very convincing because the drunken soldier immediately changed his mind and ordered the German interpreter to go back and join his comrades. Then he placed his gun on the ground and began to search me by touching in all the places where I could have hidden items in my clothing. As he reached to inspect my arms and hands he saw my wristwatch. A satisfied smile illuminated his whole face and he ordered me, '*Davay chasy*.'[14] I knew this famous phrase very well and reluctantly removed my watch and gave it to the drunken soldier.

"He inspected it carefully from all sides and tried to wind it. Then he put it on his wrist and began to admire how it looked on him. He stroked slowly the slick shiny metal, like he was caressing it. Then he turned his hand toward the sun to see the reflection on the glass and emitted a sound of satisfaction with his loot,'E-e-kh! *Italiansky chasy*!'

"Then he asked me to pull out all I had in my pockets. I had only my handkerchief and it made him angry again and he began cursing at me. I saw that the captured German men sitting on the grass watched with curiosity every move that the drunken Soviet soldier was making.

"The other soldier came close to us and I saw that he had Asian facial features, with slanted eyes and prominent cheek-bones. He placed his hand on the drunken soldier's shoulder and pointing to the watch on his wrist very calmly said to him, '*Tovarishch, khoroshiye chasy*.'[15] And I understood that he said something like, 'What more do you want? It is enough. Let the Italian go.

"The drunken soldier extended his arm showing to his comrade my watch proudly, and he repeated with great satisfaction, '*Italiansky chasy.*'

'*Da, da*,'[16] said the other soldier, '*khoroshiye chasy.*[17] Let the Italian go.'

"The drunken soldier looked at me and waved his hand, showing me that I could go. The Asian-looking soldier smiled at me and pointing to the road said 'Go, go, go.' And I took off quickly and never looked back."

I translated to our hosts the last sentence while Giulio paused for a while and then he concluded, "Now I know why I kept my watch so dearly, even when I was hungry as a prisoner of war I didn't exchange it for food. My watch was destined to save me from the stupid willfulness of a drunken Soviet soldier." Then he humbly added, "Thanks to the sound-mindedness of an Asian Soviet soldier."

Our hosts made some comments about the lawlessness of the soldiers during the war and Giulio said, "The winners are always right." The old man nodded agreement with Giulio's comment.

Suddenly we heard the muffled sound of many footsteps on the road. Hiding

behind the curtains, we all watched from the windows as the German men guarded by the Soviet soldiers marched on the road. Now that we could watch them safely, we saw that most of them were in German military uniforms. I said to Giulio, “They are not taking them to the NKVD camp. They are prisoners of war.”

Giulio pointed to the drunken soldier and said to our host, “That one took my watch. And that one convinced the drunken one to let me go.”

“You were lucky,” the woman said to Giulio. And she said to me, “You were right to be afraid to encounter them for the second time.”

And her husband added, “Never trust a drunk.”

We waited for a while to be sure that they would be far ahead of us. Then Giulio looked at me and said, “Have you rested enough? It’s time to go home.”

“Yes,” I answered, “but I am completely exhausted from all this ordeal.”

We sincerely thanked our hosts for their hospitality. They wished us good luck and said they hoped we didn’t have any more encounters with the Soviet soldiers. We didn’t even ask them if they were Polish or Germans. It didn’t matter—they were just kind people who were willing to help us.

As we got on the road, Giulio said, “As soon as we can, we will get off of the main road and walk on the secondary streets where we will be sure not encounter them again.”

I agreed and tried to keep up with Giulio’s quick pace. “It is late,” I said. “My mother is already worrying about what happened to us.”

“This time she is right to worry,” answered Giulio.

When we arrived at our apartment my mother was waiting for us outside, and indeed she was already worried about why we were late.

“I was ready to go and look for you on the road,” she said. “What happened to you? Why are you so late?”

As we were telling her about what happened to us, she was repeating, “I knew it, I knew it, that something bad happened to you. Now I will not be able to sleep all night worrying about it.”

“Mama," I told her, “it is all over. We are here safe at home. Why should you be worrying all night now?”

“I will be thinking about what could have had happened, if you had been shot and Giulio detained, and all sorts of other things that could have happened to you.”

“That’s my mother,” I said to Giulio, “she always finds something to worry about. If it didn’t happen, then she will worry about what could have happened.”

That evening Giulio and I were exhausted physically from our long walk and emotionally from what happened to us. The thought that we could have lost each other only a few hours ago sharpened our perception of how much we cared about each other and how much we needed each other. It made us feel more than ever before how deeply in love we were. And we fell asleep in each other’s arms.

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1. The German spelling of the Polish name of the town is Gliwice.
2. See chapters “The Prince of My Dreams,” “Chance, Destiny or the Will Of God,” “The Snapped Rope,” “The NKVD Lager In Laband,” and “It’s Wonderful News!”
3. Laband is the German name of the town with Polish name Labedy.
4. Estimate from the map of Poland.
5. A prestigious Swiss watch trademark.

6. Katowitz is the German name of the town with Polish name Katowice.
7. “Good day!” [in Russian].
8. “Thank you, thank you very much!” [in German].
9. Italian Prisoner Of War [in German].
10. Italian Fascist [in Russian].
11. “No, Fascist! Italian radiotelegrapher.” [in Russian].
12. German Fascist [in Russian].
13. Italian Prisoners of War camp document [in Russian].
14. “Give me the watch!” [in Russian] a phrase that became almost synonymous with the name “Soviet Army soldier.” During the WW II in Oberschlesia, Poland, the local people used to say, “Here comes ‘*Davay Chasy*.’”
15. “Comrade, it’s a nice watch” [in Russian].
16. “Yes, yes” [in Russian].
17. “Good watch” [in Russian].

Chapter 18

The Trip To the Soviet Consulate In Warsaw

By Olga Gladky Verro
Also as Remembered by Giulio Verro

When the trains from Laband began to travel again,[1] Giulio and I decided to attempt our trip to Warsaw[2] to see if we could receive an authorization for our marriage[3] from the Soviet consulate. To be able to make this trip, I waited until there were no new German men brought into the NKVD camp and asked Captain Komov to have two days off. When I told him that I would be going to the Soviet consulate in Warsaw, he sent me to ask permission from *Polkovnik* Stepanov.

Since nobody in the NKVD camp ever asked me to show them our marriage certificate, we believed they all assumed that Giulio and I were married. But we knew that they also assumed that my mother and I, like all Soviet citizens, had to return to the Soviet Union. Therefore, I told *Polkovnik* Stepanov that we were going to the Soviet consulate in Warsaw to ask permission for Giulio to go with us to the Soviet Union.

For those two days that I was absent my mother remained in Laband to be available to work in the NKVD camp if necessary. There was no reason for *Polkovnik* Stepanov to suspect that I might not return. He even wished me good luck in solving this problem quickly.

On the day of the departure we got up very early when it was still dark to take the earliest train from Laband to Katowitz, so we could return to Laband on the last train that night. It was a cloudy cold morning reminding us more of fall than spring weather, which was not unusual for that season in the region of Oberschlesia.

When we boarded the train, it was already full of passengers with all kinds of bags, suitcases, and baskets. Many were sitting on their luggage in the middle of the passageway, leaving barely enough space to put a foot down for those who needed to walk through. We found a place in the passageway not far from the exit door, where we both could stand supporting our backs against the wall.

Giulio said, “We don’t have to travel for too long in this train, only to the station at Katowitz where we have to transfer to another train to Warsaw. Let’s hope that we are able to find a place to sit in that train because we have to travel for about two hundred miles, and that probably will take several hours before we reach Warsaw.”

Shortly after we left the station at Laband it began to rain; at first it was coming down slowly and then, as we traveled east, it increased in intensity. As we arrived in Katowitz, many passengers were changing trains and were in a hurry to get out and board the train to Warsaw. It was good that we were standing close to the exit door and were among the first to come out and run in the drenching rain to the Warsaw train standing on another track.

This train was also full of passengers and all seats were already taken. But the passageway was not yet filled and we quickly walked its length to see if we could find

some spot to sit. In one compartment I saw a little girl sleeping with her head in a woman's lap and the rest of her body lying on the bench, leaving a narrow space at the corner of the bench. I stopped and looked at the woman without saying a word. She pushed the girl's legs closer to the back of the bench and told me in Polish, "*Pani,*[4] sit here. You are skinny and don't need much space. It is better that we share it with you before some big man asks me to take her in my lap."

I thanked her and accommodated myself as best I could at the edge of the bench. Giulio stood in the passageway, leaning with his arm against the back of the bench and protecting me from the passengers who were coming aboard there and at every station where the train was stopping. In search for a place to stand they pushed themselves and their luggage without regard to anybody in their way. Giulio remained standing all those long hours until we reached Warsaw. I asked him several times to change places with me for a while but he stoically refused my offer.

Through the window streaked with rainwater we could see the dark gray sky. The rain was coming steadily but at times it was very heavy and we could hear how it was pounding on the roof of the car. The new passengers were coming in all drenched, and the air in the car became damp and filled with the smell of wet clothing and muddy shoes; all this in addition to the accumulated bluish pungent smoke from all kinds of tobacco men smoked, disregarding its effects on other passengers. Maybe, being pregnant, I was more sensitive to it than the others.

Under these conditions the trip seemed twice as long as it really was. Giulio and I occasionally exchanged a few words in French, but we preferred not to attract too much attention to the fact that we were foreigners, although Giulio was wearing his Italian Air Force uniform to authenticate his national origin in the Russian Consulate. He told me to try to nap if I could because ahead of us was a very long day and night before we returned home. But I couldn't sleep even if I wanted to because of the nauseating smell in the car.

Finally the conductor announced that the train was coming to Warsaw. The lethargic passengers aroused from hours of inertia and began to get up, to look for their luggage; some even attempted, though not very successfully, to move closer to the exit. I think that train was not going any farther, because all passengers were getting out of the train.

The misty rain encountered us outside. With our heads bent down and looking only in front of us, we hurried to follow the others to the building used as a temporary station. When we raised our heads, we saw against the background of low, dark clouds the remains of the Warsaw station. Its collapsed walls resembled the skeleton of some monstrous crippled animal. Knowing the awesome effects of powerful explosions, Giulio commented, "Obviously, they had heavy aerial or artillery bombardments here. Only heavy bombs or shells could have inflicted such extensive damage."

But we were in a hurry and had to follow the other passengers through the temporary station. We exited outside hoping to find streetcars going to the city. Instead we found several horse-pulled wagons. The big wooden freight wagons had been adapted for transporting people by adding canvas-covered roofs and several rows of boards to seat as many passengers as possible. The coachmen were loudly announcing their routes. I approached the first coachman and asked him in Russian, "*Sovietsky Consulat*?"

He pointed to another wagon where the coachman was announcing, “The Old City.”

I asked him, “*Sovietsky Consulat*?”

“*Tak, Paninka*,”[5] he answered in Polish and, extending his hand, said how many zloty we had to pay him before climbing on the wagon. Giulio paid him and the man helped us to climb up and gestured to where we should sit on the boards to leave the center free for the passage of other passengers. I said to Giulio, “Let’s sit here in front so we could see the city. At least we will be able to tell that we saw the city of Warsaw.”

Glad to be out of the rain, we accommodated ourselves on the second board behind the driver and observed the other passengers climbing into the wagon. Then I saw that the horse attached to the wagon was small and skinny. I said to Giulio, “Look at that poor horse. Do you think she will be able to pull this heavy wagon full of people and luggage?”

“The owner must know if she can,” answered Giulio. “If he kills the horse, he will be out of business tomorrow.”

When the wagon was full, the coachman gently patted the side of the horse, awaking her from her nap. Then he climbed on his seat, took the reins, and prompted the horse by cracking a whip in the air. It took the horse several attempts to start moving the wagon, but once it began to roll she walked at a slow steady pace as if she was in a trance.

The driver explained to the passengers that to reach the Old City we had to travel through the New City and cross the River Vistula. From the dark dirty-gray sky the rain was coming in a steady fine drizzle, filling the air with a mist that prevented us from clearly seeing the outlines of the tall multistory buildings in the distance.

As we came closer, we could see just the remnants of the buildings’ walls. Some walls remained standing with empty holes where doors and windows had been. These tall walls stood here and there all along the road on which we traveled, and it seemed that a light wind could make them tumble down on us. Some walls were partially or completely crumbled, with piles of rubble filling the inner space between wall outlines. Giulio said, “It looks like it was a carpet bombing. The whole area is completely destroyed. Nobody could have survived it.”

I wondered, “Why do they continue to call it the New City? Maybe only because it was built in more recent times? Now, after it was completely destroyed by the bombardments, the more appropriate name for it would be the Ghost City.”

Giulio was shaking his head in disbelief that such complete destruction of this big city could have happened and was telling me his thoughts about it. “Did this happen at the beginning of the war when the Germans first conquered Poland? Or did it happen only recently when the Soviet Army was fighting the Germans here? As you know, during the war this information about the battles was cleverly concealed and distorted in favor of the Germans, even during the time when I was in the Italian Air Force.

But after I became a prisoner of war there was almost a complete blackout of war-related news. It didn’t get much better following our change of status to foreign workers and before the Soviets arrived in Laband. We had to rely on word of mouth for news about the front line and the situation in Europe and Germany. We lived in the midst of war-torn Europe and at the same time were completely isolated from what was going on around us.”

“It’s true,” I agreed, “But think only how lucky we were to live through the whole war and never be in the midst of such terrible battles! They were always somewhere else, not where we were. For some unknown reason, the places we lived changed hands without fighting. During the whole war I never saw anyone being wounded or killed, I only heard about it.”

“I witnessed,” replied Giulio, “when one German pilot crashed on an airfield, and as he was burning inside he screamed, ‘Water! Water!’ But the flames were so strong that it was impossible to save him”.

The horse was walking at an even slower pace and the coachman never tried to make her go faster. It took a long time for her to bring us to the River Vistula. The coachman said, “Here is the bridge and across the river is the Old City.” We looked ahead trying to see the bridge but we couldn’t see it. The wagon began to roll down toward the river and the horse had to sustain the weight to keep it from going down too fast.

Finally, we saw a pontoon bridge built on one side of the skeleton of the old destroyed bridge. The horse walked carefully now as the whole wagon was shifting from one side to another on the uneven and oscillating surface. The misty light that filtered through the gray sky reflected in the water and made everything look muddy-drab-gray like in a black-and-white poorly focused photograph. It included the shaded panorama of the Old City that we could barely see across the river.

When we entered the Old City, we could see that it had not been as devastated by the bombardments and we were able to see many antique style buildings. Giulio said, “This part of Warsaw looks like any other old European city. It is too bad that it is raining and we don’t have enough time to see it. In all probability, we will never return here.”

The coachman stopped several times to let off passengers who had reached their destination. Then he stopped and told us, “*Sovietsky Consulat*.” We got down from the wagon and I asked him when he would be coming by to return to the station. He replied that when we were ready we should wait near the main door of the consulate building; if we didn’t make it by the time when he returned, another coachman would be coming by.

When Giulio and I entered the building of the Soviet consulate we saw lots of people in the waiting room. Several employees were selecting who would be seen by the consul first and were showing them to enter the anteroom to wait their turn.

A woman employee asked us our reason for coming to see the consul. She was a very friendly middle-age woman and I told her that I was pregnant and that we had come to ask for authorization to be married so we could go to the Soviet Union together. She treated us in a somewhat motherly way and allowed us to enter the anteroom very soon after we arrived. We didn’t have to wait long for our turn; most of the people were dismissed rather quickly by the consul, who was calling “Next!” loudly before the previous visitors were out of his office.

When our turn came, we entered the consul's office and saluted him; he answered in a laconic manner like he was tired of saluting people. He didn’t ask us to sit down, although there were chairs in front of his desk. I introduced myself, "I am Olga Gladkaya.”[6] Then pointing to Giulio said, “He is Giulio Verro, an Italian prisoner of war.”

“Why did you come to see me?” he asked without seeking any other information about us.

“We came to ask for authorization for a marriage between the Soviet and the Italian citizens. We want to go together to the Soviet Union.”

The consul didn’t show any regard to our feelings as persons who were seeking his help and answered very coldly, “Each of you shall return to your own country. Marriages between Soviet citizens and citizens of other countries are prohibited. Those are the orders I have.”

I translated it in French to Giulio, who told me to present the other argument to which we agreed before. And I said to the consul, “We want to get married because we are going to have a baby and we want this child to have both a mother and a father.”

Without showing any emotion on his face, which remained like it was made of stone, the consul answered in a laconic voice, sounding like he had recited this answer many times, “The orders do not allow for any exceptions.” And he repeated, “Each of you shall return to your own country.”

Then he assumed a sarcastic expression on his face and added cynically, “This war has left millions of children without fathers. It doesn’t make any difference if there is one more fatherless child.” And he looked at us as if he wanted to get rid of us as soon as possible.

I translated his answer in French to Giulio, who was shocked to hear such cold disregard to his unborn child. He looked at the consul with disdain and told him in French, “It does matter to me and to my child!” And said to me, “Translate it to him!”

As I was translating it, Giulio abruptly grabbed my arm and pulling me toward the door told me in French, “Let’s go! We don’t have anything else to do here!”

He had done it so quickly that I didn’t have a chance to finish the translation to the consul, who was not listening to me anyway and was already calling, “Next!”

On our way through the anteroom the woman employee who had interviewed us before came close to me and whispered, “The answer was ‘No’?” I made a sign with my head confirming it. “Why do you want to return to the Soviet Union? Don’t you know what awaits you there? It is better for you to go to Italy,” she suggested, whispering in my ear. She looked around to see if there was anyone near who could hear her and continued whispering to me, “You should go to Prague, in Czechoslovakia. There is an Italian consulate. They don’t have such orders prohibiting marriages with Soviet citizens. Good luck to you!” And she quickly squeezed my hand and returned to the table where she had been working before.

When we walked outside, the rain had diminished somewhat and we walked back and forth on the sidewalk waiting for the coachman. I told Giulio word for word what the woman employee had whispered in my ear. Giulio perked up and, as he often did, replied with an Italian proverb, “*Non si chiude mai una porta, senza che il Dio ne apra una finestra*.” And he translated it to me in French, “God never shuts one door without opening a window.”

“That woman employee gave us her advice at her own risk,” I said.

Giulio replied, “There are still some good people in this world.” He reflected for a while and said almost with regret, “Well, it seems that I have to give up on seeing the Soviet Union.” After a short pause he concluded, “Now we have only one place to go, to Italy.”

We were out of the Soviet consulate so quickly that the same coachman with the skinny horse gave us a ride back to the railroad station, and we were able to get on an

earlier train that was ready to depart from Warsaw going west. Being among the last ones to get on the train, we found it filled to capacity and couldn't go farther than the door leading to the passageway of the car. However, it worked to our advantage because after the train was on its way, Giulio saw a conductor opening and sitting down on his pull-down seat located next to the door.

Giulio grabbed my hand and, pulling me, pushed his way toward the conductor. Without saying a word Giulio carefully pulled from breast-pocket of his uniform a bunch of Polish zloty and inconspicuously placed them in the conductor's hand. Then he pointed at me and at the conductor's seat. The conductor inspected the amount of money and put the bills in his pocket smiling.

He got up and said to me respectfully, "*Proshu Panochka,*[7] sit down here."

I said, as respectfully as he did, "*Dzenkuyu*,[8] conductor." And I sat on the conductor's seat.

Giulio stood in front of me again during the whole trip, as he had on the other train, and shielded me with his body from the pressure of other standing passengers.

I said, "It was quick thinking. Thank you, my dear."

He replied, "If one has the money, the right price can buy almost anything. I gave him everything that was left in my pocket. After all, we had designated this money for our trip to Warsaw."

During the long hours on the train Giulio and I discussed in a soft voice in French how to tell my mother about what happened at the consulate. We decided not to tell her right away about the possibility of going to Prague to the Italian consulate because it could upset her too much. "We will tell her at the right time," said Giulio. "There is no need to worry her now before we find a way to get there."

We arrived in Laband much earlier than we had planned. My mother was surprised to see us back so soon and she concluded, "You didn't accomplish anything. Right?"

"Right," we replied. And Giulio and I recounted word for word our audience with the Soviet consul. Giulio was still outraged with the cruel remarks of the consul and he said to her, "That swine had the nerve to tell us sarcastically, 'This war has left millions of children without fathers. It doesn't make any difference if there is one more fatherless child.'"

On the next day *Polkovnik* Stepanov came to our apartment to find out the results of our visit to the Soviet consulate. As usual, we offered him a drink of our home-made *kvass*, which he really enjoyed.

"Well, what have you accomplished in Warsaw?" he asked us.

I said, "Do you want to hear the exact words of the consul? They say it all." And I recited them for Polkovnik, "Each of you shall return to your own country. Those are the orders that I have." Then I repeated the consul's answer to Giulio's plea that he wanted his child to have a father, "The orders do not allow for any exceptions. This war has left millions of children without fathers. It doesn't make any difference if there is one more fatherless child." And I told him that Giulio had the courage to say to the consul, "It makes a difference to me, and to my child."

Polkovnik Stepanov was standing in the kitchen listening to me and sipping our *kvass*. While I was telling him all this, he was nodding his head as he was trying to remember the exact words of the consul. When I finished, he stood for a few seconds

silent reflecting on the simplistic authoritarian orders, which the consul applied without regard to human feelings.

Then he remarked in a sympathetic tone of voice, “So, the consul said ‘There are no exceptions.’ Yes, it’s very easy for him to say, but it is not so easy for you to accept.”

I felt that this was the right moment to tell him that the employee at the consulate had told us that both the Italian and the Soviet Consulates are in Prague; there we could clear our situation of the mixed nationality marriage. However, we would wait until be the trains going there would allow us to travel to Czechoslovakia.

“You see,” concluded *Polkovnik* Stepanov, “you have to be patient—do not give up hope. Time changes many things. As the life in Europe becomes more normal, it could bring the solution to your situation.”

We perceived these words of *Polkovnik* Stepanov, a high-ranking NKVD officer, as a subtle message to us that we should look for other ways to solve our problem. Therefore, since *Polkovnik* Stepanov agreed that it was a good idea for us to wait and go to Prague, I also told Captain Komov, *Podpolkovnik* Kozhevnikov, doctor Ludmila Larionovna, and her assistant Zina about this. Therefore, it became known to all of them that we were waiting for the opportunity to go to Prague. We didn’t want them to be surprised when we suddenly went there.

On the eighth of May 1945, the news about the end of the war had spread quickly in the NKVD camp, among the Soviet military, and among the population of Laband. The NKVD officers, agents, and guards were celebrating and talking about going home. The local Polish population was rejoicing; they proudly wore the national colored ribbons attached to their clothing and were hoping that the Soviet troops would go home soon.

The Soviet citizens in the hamlet were also happy about the end of the war, but their joy was short-lived because they dreaded the moment when they would be deported against their will back to the Soviet Union. They were mostly women and children, the families of the *Volksdeutsche,* and some of the specialist workers. Many of them didn’t speak very well either German, or Polish, so they could not just walk away from the hamlet of Laband and disappear among the local population; they knew they would be found anywhere by the Soviets. Therefore, they had no choice but to stay in the hamlet and wait with apprehension for the forced deportation to the Soviet concentration camps.

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1. This story was recounted through the years so many times to so many people that all the details remained vividly in memory.
2. Capital of Poland.
3. See the chapters “Chance, Destiny, or the Will of God,” “The NKVD Lager in Laband,” “It’s Wonderful News!” and “Giulio’s Watch.”
4. Mrs. [in Polish].
5. “Yes, Miss.” [in Polish].
6. Russian spelling of a feminine last name Gladky.
7. “Please, Young Lady.” [in Polish].
8. “Thank you” [in Polish].

Chapter 19

Becoming Entrepreneurs

By Olga Gladky Verro
Also as Remembered by Antonina G. Berezhnaya Gladky and Giulio Verro

From the time the Soviet Army troops occupied Laband they allowed the Polish to take over the local civilian government because the region of *Oberschlesia* belonged to Poland before it was annexed by Germany at the beginning of World War II. The Polish central government was slow in gaining control and in coordinating with the regional and local governments, whose powers were limited by the occupying Soviet Army. Therefore, the local civilian government didn't function with the same efficiency and order as it did under the Germans. For a long time there was no bread available for the population and the families had to find food by bartering, first in the neighboring villages, and later, as the Polish zloty again became an accepted monetary unit, by selling anything they had and buying food in big regional markets in the towns like Katowitz.

After our visit to Gleiwitz, where Giulio encountered and talked with the group of Italians, he decided to try his luck on the market.[1] We had many women's dresses and household linens that were left to us by our *Volksdeutsche* neighbors[2] when they escaped from the advancing Soviet Army. Giulio suggested that we couldn't take it all with us when the time came to leave Poland either to the Soviet Union or to Italy. My mother also liked the idea of going to the market and she began to sort and prepare the items that we could take.

This decision came at a time when the number of German men being brought to the NKVD camp had diminished considerably and my mother and I were working only a few days a week when Captain Komov called us to register the newly arrived men.[3] We still were receiving daily rations from the camp's kitchen but we anticipated some changes very soon when our services in the NKVD camp would not be needed. Therefore, we had to think about new ways of finding food.

The first time all three of us, my mother, Giulio, and I, went to the market in Katowitz. Although there was a train going from Laband to Gleiwitz, we didn't have enough Polish zloty to pay for the three tickets and we had to walk there. My mother and I decided that, since it was already the summer season, we should begin by selling the women's cotton dresses. We packed them for Giulio to carry because we had to walk to Gleiwitz on the same unpaved count¬ry road where only a few weeks before the drunken Soviet soldier had fired at me and taken Giulio's watch.[4] This time we took our NKVD camp passes and Guilio's documents just in case we had another unpleasant encounter.

As we walked, Giulio and I remembered the whole episode and showed my mother the infamous place where it happened. But we had to change our subject of conversation because my mother felt overly anxious about our safety on that road. In

Gleiwitz we took the streetcar, which brought us to the market at Katowitz.

Our first attempt to do business at the market was not very successful. The dresses were not in big demand, especially because the size of our skinny neighbor was far too small for the robust Polish peasant women who brought food to the market. My mother managed to barter one or two dresses for some butter and a few eggs. But we found out that what was in great demand with these women were aprons. As we were returning home, we had plenty of time to evaluate our first experience at the market.

I told them, "I have an idea. If the demand is for aprons, we could very easily transform all those small size dresses into large size aprons to fit the stout peasant women." My mother and Giulio approved my proposition unanimously.

I borrowed a hand-operated sewing machine from my aunt and began to use my imagination and my sewing skills in transforming dresses into aprons. Giulio and my mother were taking them at least once a week to the market.

Giulio would put several aprons on each arm and holding them horizontally would display them by walking between the tables where the Polish peasant women were selling their food products. He was attracting their attention by calling loudly in Polish only one word: "*Fartuky! Fartuky!*"[5] My mother was walking beside him acting as a saleswoman, demons¬trating and fitting the aprons, and contracting for a price or bartering it for a product. This enterprise was very successful and we enriched our diet with a variety of foods: butter, eggs, farmer's cheese, milk, sour cream, and vegetables.

But the supply of dresses that we had was going down very fast and we began to sell the bed linen, such as the sheets and pillowcases, and the other household linen, such as the tablecloths and bath and kitchen towels, which were also left to us by our generous next-door neighbor. Now we had some Polish zloty and we could afford to take the train from Laband to Gleiwitz, but Giulio's job was still to carry these heavy items and to help my mother sell them on the market.

Soon, my mother began to barter for my aunt and, through her, the word spread. The other women who could not go to the market themselves because they had small children began to ask her to sell their items and to buy them food products, giving her small commission.

Another source of commissions came from the NKVD camp's doctor Ludmila Larionovna and her assistant Zina, who were tired of the camp's cafeteria food and wanted to have some fresh farm products. Eventually, some other NKVD officers also began to give orders to my mother to buy them some food that they didn't have in their rations.

Then my mother's business began to grow because Ludmila Larionovna and other NKVD officers also began to give her orders to buy for them variety of items they wanted for themselves or as gifts for their families. Giulio was acting as a partner who was in charge of carrying goods to and from the market and in finding the requested products.

I went to the market only occasionally. Most of the time when we didn't have to work in the NKVD camp I was sewing the layette for the baby from our next-door neighbor's items. My aunt had some patterns that she had used in sewing for her baby and now they came in handy for me. I made tiny infant's shirts and caps from fine batiste lingerie adorned with lace, entre-deux,[6] and embroidery. Some I finished by crocheting the edges with colored embroidery floss bartered for sugar from my aunt. I

made several sets of diapers from bed sheets and made several baby blankets by cutting a lightweight blanket and crocheting the hems with yarn.

When I made many items for baby layette, I brought them to show to my aunt. She was surprised with the work I made from the items I had and said to me, “I always knew that you were an intellectual type girl and were a very good student, but I never imagined that you were able to sew and to be so creative.”

“It is never late,” I sad to her, “to change your opinion, especially when it is for the best. But you should know that as a young girl I sewed a lot of dresses for my doll and knew how to crochet and embroider.”

After a while she said to me, “You know, if you don’t get offended, I will tell you something else that I never expected from you.”

“Is it something bad?” I asked her.

“Well, not bad,” she replied, “but you may perceive it that way. But I don’t mean it to be bad.”

I was intrigued and wanted to know what it was and promised her, “Well, tell me what it is, I will not be offended.”

“Well, I always believed,” she confessed, “that you were a naive and unworldly young girl who would have a hard time finding a husband. I would have never expected that you were capable of catching a man by making him the father of your child.”

Astonished with her reasoning I said to her, “Antonina Yulyevna, not every young girl or woman is in pursuit of a man at any cost. You should realize that some girls do fall in love and are loved in return. It just happens that I am very much in love with Giulio and he is in love with me. He asked me to marry him before the Soviets arrived here. To catch a man one has to deceive him into marrying her. In my case it is very improbable that we will ever get married. You know very well that sooner or later we will be deported to the concentration camps in Siberia. Giulio and I love each other on borrowed time. I just decided that I deserve to have a little bit of happiness before forces beyond our control separate us and we lose each other forever. I am very happy that I will have his child to remember the happiness we had for the short time that destiny allowed us to be together.”

Antonina Yulyevna placed her hand on my shoulder in a friendly gesture and said, “I am sorry for having such thoughts about you. I am glad that you are happy. I can see that Giulio loves you very much. You are lucky - he is a fine young man.”

She paused for a while and emitting a deep sigh said, “Don’t remind me about deportation. I don’t know where the Soviets will deport you and your mother because you work in the NKVD camp, but us, the *Volksdeutsche*, they will surely send to the concentration camps. It is on everybody’s mind here in the hamlet.” She covered her eyes with her hands, like she didn’t wanted me to see what she was thinking and said, “My poor children! What will happen to them?!”

I took this opportunity to ask her, “Antonina Yulyevna, why didn’t you evacuate with the children when Igor was telling you to go to your friends who lived near the French border? You would have been safe there now.”

“You see,” she began hesitantly, “Igor and I quarreled a lot because for some time we had marital problems and I believed that by sending us away, he wanted to get rid of me and the children. I was afraid to remain alone, especially with the new baby that was to be born any time, and I insisted that we all go together. I waited hoping that he would

come with us, until it was too late. I never expected that he would walk away at the last moment and leave me alone with the children."

She didn't tell me what kind of marital problems they had and I didn't insist on finding out. I assumed that they probably were of an intimate nature and she didn't feel comfortable talking to me about them. I felt that she was wrong in blaming her husband for what had happened and that she should blame herself for being so stubborn by remaining in Laband; my uncle had tried to send her and the children to a safe place where they could be reunited after the war, or maybe even sooner. But I did not reproach her because I believed that she was punished enough by her destiny.

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1. See the chapter "Giulio's Watch."
2. See the chapter "The Prince of My Dreams."
3. See the chapter "The NKVD Camp in Laband."
4. See the chapter "Giulio's Watch."
5. "Aprons! Aprons!" [in Polish].
6. Narrow inset of lace.

Chapter 20

Deportation Of Soviet Citizens by the NKVD

By Olga Gladky Verro
Also as Remembered by Antonina G. Berezhnaya Gladky and Giulio Verro

Not long after I had the conversation with my aunt about the inevitability of deportation to the concentration camps, the NKVD Repatriation Unit especially designated for the deportation of the Soviet citizens to the Soviet Union arrived in Laband.[1] Although they set up residences and offices in the same camp with the NKVD unit that was deporting the German men to the Soviet Union, they functioned completely independently of each other.

Right after their arrival the Soviet Repatriation Officers took a census in the hamlet of all the families that came from the Soviet Union, from the Baltic States, and from the part of Poland annexed to the Soviet Union before the German's surprise attack. The census included the *Volksdeutsche* and the specialist workers' families. They were ordered not to move from the hamlet until they were notified to get ready for, as they called it, the "repatriation home," which in reality meant the forced deportation to the NKVD concentration camps.

The *Volksdeutsche* families had a lot of baggage because when the Germans evacuated them from the Soviet Union to Germany they were allowed to bring everything with them they liked except furniture. Now the Soviet Repatriation Officers told them the same thing, that they should take all their possessions with them when they would be departing "back home." They promised to provide transportation from their apartments to the railroad station. My aunt was satisfied that they were allowed to take everything with them because it meant that they would have all the things necessary to get started when they arrived wherever they were deported. Like all the other *Volksdeutsche*, she didn't believe that their destination was their hometown because she knew from the destiny of her three brothers that having German origins meant deportation to a concentration camp in the far region of the Soviet Union.

At the time this happened, my mother and I were still working in the NKVD camp as interpreters for the NKVD unit which was in charge of deporting the German men to the Soviet Union. We lived on one side of a duplex house standing next to the NKVD camp gate and it didn't look as a part of the hamlet's workers's apartment complex. Therefore, we were not included in the census of Soviet citizens and no one told us to get ready for the repatriation. We assumed that maybe it was because we worked in the NKVD camp, but we certainly didn't go to ask anybody why we were not included.

Now the number of German men being brought to the camp had diminished considerably and we worked only a few hours one or two days during the week, but we went every day to get our rations in the kitchen. Every day we saw either Captain Komov, or *Polkovnik* Stepanov, or *Podpolkovnik* Kozhevnikov, and none of them mentioned anything about the census or the repatriation to the Soviet Union. And nobody told us

that my mother and I were remaining in Laband because we were needed in the camp as interpreters. They all behaved as though nothing special that should concern us was going on and we did the same. After all, we were told right from the beginning that we were drafted to work in the NKVD camp for as long as they needed us.

My mother and I were very fond of my little cousin Nanochka and begged my aunt to leave her with us. We were trying to convince my aunt that it would alleviate her burden of having to care and provide for two small children, the baby, and an old mother, but she wouldn't hear of it.

Sometime in the last week of August my cousin Fredik came to our apartment with a message, "Mama said to tell you that we were ordered to get ready for tomorrow morning for a departure 'home.'" We knew what it meant and all three of us, my mother, Giulio, and I, went immediately to my aunt's apartment.

She encountered us with tears in her eyes saying, "It's tomorrow morning! The Repatriation Officers have given an order in the hamlet to the *Volksdeutsche* and to all other families from the Soviet Union to be ready with all their belongings. They told us not to leave anything here, especially food and clothing, that there would be plenty of carts pulled by horses to carry us to the train."

My aunt was almost finished with packing all the nonessential items. She had begun this task when the Repatriation Officers took a census in the hamlet and told them to be ready to go "home." We asked my aunt what she needed for the trip that we could give her. She said, "Any kind of nonperishable food that you can give us would be helpful. Who knows if they will feed us during the trip, which may be very long. And if you have some old blankets, we could use them to put on the floor in the freight car. I don't expect that they will be transporting us in the passenger cars with all the luggage that they told to take with us."

My mother told Giulio and me, "Go home and bring the heavy sky-blue bedspread and a blanket that you decided not to take with you because they are too heavy to carry. And also bring a loaf of bread and a big bag of the dry bread that we kept to make *kvass*." Then she decided, "I better come with you. Maybe I will find some other food that we can give them."

My aunt reminded us, "Don't forget to bring back my sewing machine. It will be very handy for me to sew clothes for the children, for me, and for Babushka."

When we arrived home, Giulio said, "We should give her sugar for the children. There is some left in the bag that we got from the railroad car in the first days of the Soviet occupation. We can buy sugar for ourselves on the market." My mother also found a piece of lard that they could eat with the bread. My aunt was glad that we gave her the sugar that was needed to put in the water for the little baby Igor when he was crying. Giulio helped my aunt pack some big items and made another trip to our apartment to bring some rope to wrap them. He promised her he would come the next morning to help her load her belongings on the cart.

The next morning, the day of the departure, my mother, Giulio, and I went to my aunt's apartment. Giulio helped bring out the heavy items and my mother and I stayed inside with Nanochka and Fredik, keeping them and us away from the Repatriation Officers and Soviet Army soldiers who watched everybody load the carts.

As soon as one family was ready, a Repatriation Officer would check them on his list, order them to climb on the cart; then he would climb on the front of the cart, sit next

to the driver and order to the soldier to drive away. As the carts were passing by on the street between the rows of apartment buildings, the departing family solemnly saluted their neighbors, who answered them with the somber “good-bye,” as if they were going to a funeral.

Before my aunt was ready, some of the drivers returned from the railroad station to take another family. My aunt found out that they were taking them to a freight train waiting on the secondary tracks at the station in Laband and that there were many Repatriation Officers and Army soldiers watching to make sure no one escaped.

When all my aunt’s possessions were loaded, it came time to say our last “good-bye” to my aunt, Babushka, and the children. It was a sad day; we all had tears in our eyes; everyone, except the children, knew that for them the hard times were ahead and that probably we would not see each other for a very long time, or maybe forever. We embraced each other several times before leaving the apartment. “If you have a chance to see Igor again,” said my aunt, “tell him what happened to me and to our children. Tell him to search for us in the camps where the *Volksdeutsche* are deported.”

She wished Giulio and me good luck to remain together and to take care of our baby. Then she asked my mother, “What will happen to you?”

“Whatever destiny has in store for me,” my mother replied and asked again if her sister-in-law would leave her daughter Nanochka with us. But Antonina Yulyevna answered categorically that all her children would stay with her.

At the last moment I remembered to give her Giulio’s Italian address and told her to write to him, to send her address, and to tell him what happened to them.

“Remember that my father and Igor have Giulio’s address too and you may also find out what happened to your husband, if he writes to Giulio.”

“Are you kidding,” replied my aunt bitterly, “the NKVD would never allow us to send letters from the concentration camp to a foreign country. My brothers were not able to write to their families in their own country when they were arrested before the war. And you are telling me to write to Italy!”

When we got out of the apartment and stood on the sidewalk we were exchanging the conventional phrases that people use in a normal situation when relatives move to another town, as if we wanted to forget how tragic this departure was.

Suddenly the Repatriation Officer arrived and asked, “Are you ready?” And without waiting for the answer ordered, “Climb on the cart!”

Giulio first helped Babushka to climb up and my aunt gave her little Igor to hold in her arms. Then he helped Nanochka, Fredik, and Antonina Yulyevna to climb up and they settled as best they could on top of the bundles.

The Repatriation Officer counted them again and checked on his list. Then he climbed on the front of the cart and sat next to the driver. He made a sign with his hand that he was ready to go and the driver pulled the reins. The wheels of the cart emitted a squeaky sound like the cry of a wounded bird and slowly began to move. As the cart rolled away on the street, the children and my aunt were waving to us and we waved back to them; then, as they cart turned on the corner, we had our last glimpse of my aunt and my three little cousins.

“Poor children, poor Antonina Yulyevna!” said my mother.

And I commented, “You know, if we were still living in the hamlet, we probably would have been departing with them now.”

“And if you were not working for the NKVD,” added Giulio.

“And probably, if *Podpolkovnik* Kozhevnikov was not interested in my services to his lover, the doctor, in bartering items for her on the market,” added my mother.

“Maybe all of these added together,” concluded Giulio.

All saddened, with heavy hearts, we returned to our apartment near the NKVD camp gate.

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1. Forced deportation to the Soviet concentration camps of all Soviet citizens who by the end of WWII were in occupied Germany was called “repatriation home.” In fact, it was a punishment for all of them who were coined by the Soviets as “traitors, collaborators, and war criminals” regardless of how and why they got there.

Chapter 21

The Three Thousand Zloty Solution

By Olga Gladky Verro
Also as Remembered by Antonina G. Berezhnaya Gladky and Giulio Verro

In the weeks that followed[1] the deportation of Soviet citizens[2] from Laband by the special NKVD division, the number of German men brought to the NKVD camp had diminished so much that we worked only when we were requested to come by Captain Komov. Now we were going several times a week to the market in Katovitz. For some time my mo¬ther had been taking commissions from the NKVD doctor Lyudmila Larionovna[3] to buy all kinds of lingerie and clothing items. One day she was asked to find out if there was a jeweler in Katowitz and if he was interested in bartering a gold coin for gold jewelry and she gave it to my mother under strict instructions not to reveal that it belonged to her.

My mother, Giulio, and I went to the jewelry store in Katowitz and showed the owner the gold coin. When the owner examined it, he expressed an interest in making the transaction and showed us some gold jewelry that Lyudmila Larionovna wanted to have in exchange. Giulio examined each piece, checked how many karats were marked on it, and then together we selected the ones that we thought would appeal to Lyudmila Larionovna. To complete the transaction my mother was able to bargain with the jeweler to add some zloty for her services, promising him that she would come back in his store if she had some other orders for jewelry. Probably the gold coin was more valuable than the jewelry he gave in barter, because he didn't bargain too hard and my mother made a good commission on the transaction.

Giulio used this occasion to ask the jeweler if he was interested in the jeweler's lathe that he found on the barge[4] where we also found our wedding rings and he described in detail what kind of machine it was.

The jeweler replied, "If it is as good as you are telling me, I will be interested. Bring it here so I can see what condition it is." He didn't express much interest in the watch springs that we got in the same place, but told him to bring them anyway.

We were returning to Laband in a good mood considering that our trip to Katowitz was very successful. My mother bought more food with her commission, Giulio found where to sell his jeweler's lathe, and I was happy that the jewel¬ry items for our doctor-friend were really beautiful and anticipated her joy in receiving them. I considered her now as "my" doctor because she was very kind in monitoring my pregnancy and in giving me good advice; but most of all, I expected her to assist me in the childbirth if I was still in Laband when it happened.

As we were traveling in the streetcar back to Gleiwitz, on one of the stops Giulio saw his Polish friend Rufin Swizsi, whom he had worked with before at the *Presswerke Laband* in the telephone workshop. He was waiting on the platform for the streetcar going in another direction. Windows in our car were opened and Giulio called him, "Rufin!

Rufin!" He came close to the window and both were very surprised to see each other.

"Giulio, you have remained here? I thought you were gone with the other Italians!" Then Rufin saw me from the window and asked, "Are you staying with Olga? You should come and visit me this Sunday. I work in Zabrze, that's Hindenburg in German." He tore a piece of paper from a package he was holding and wrote his home address: "Rufin Swizsi, Michalkowice, ul. Granicna, 5."

Our streetcar doors were closing and, in giving his address to Giulio when we were already moving, Rufin added, "You take the streetcar to my town right here!"

"What a surprise," said Giulio, "to encounter him at the streetcar stop. We are definitely going to see him on Sunday. He has my camera that I bartered with him for food when I was a prisoner of war. We will ask him to make some photos of us."

I agreed, "You are right. Do you realize that we don't have any photo of each other except the snapshots from the automatic camera that was making pictures for the documents."

My mother said to Giulio, "I saw that they sell cameras at the market. Our business is going well. Why don't you look to see if you can find one to buy for yourself?"

"If I sell the jeweler's lathe," answered Giulio, "I definitely will look for one to buy." And he added, "Next week I will bring the lathe to the jeweler before he changes his mind."

On Sunday Giulio and I went to visit Rufin. Michalkowice was a small town near the town of Katowitz and with the help of local people we easily found the street and the house. Rufin was genuinely happy to see Giulio. He introduced us to his lovely wife, Lidia, who was already cooking a dinner in our honor.

To communicate we used four languages. Rufin and Lidia spoke German and Polish but, since Giulio could not understand it very well, I had to translate to him in French and to translate Giulio's answers to Rufin and Lidia from French to either German or Polish, sometimes mixed with Ukrainian words. But we understood everything and had fun remembering the days when we were working at the *Presswerke* Laband.

Giulio told Rufin about their German coworker Kiklas being in the NKVD camp and how he had managed so far not to be deported to the Soviet Union. He also told him the sad news about another coworker, Kramer, who died on the roof of one of the buildings where he was with a machine-gun as a member of the civil defense unit when the Soviet Army took over the *Presswerke*.

Rufin already knew that the Germans had taken everybody from the camp, including the Italians, into Germany. "I was very lucky," said Giulio, "to come to Olga's place in the morning and to remain with her that night because her father and his brother had escaped from the Soviets. That one day and night made the difference between being together or losing each other forever."

I was already showing the signs of pregnancy and Rufin jokingly said, "I see that you didn't lose any time and are expecting a baby."

"We are very happy about it," answered Giulio, embracing me gently. "But we need to solve one big problem—the Soviet authorities won't give us permission to get married."

When we recounted what happened to us when we visited the Soviet consulate in Warsaw,[5] Ruffin and Lidia were appalled to hear the exact words of the Soviet consul.

Then we told them about our decision to go to the Italian consulate in Prague to see if we could receive permission to go to Italy together. “But that would be much easier,” said Giulio, “if we had a certificate of marriage.”

Rufin reflected for a few seconds and replied, “I work in the Town Hall in Zabrze and I know that legally it is impossible to do because the Soviets are very strict in prohibiting marriages of the Soviet citizens with any person of another country. But if you want to have only the certificate of marriage without actually officially registering the marriage...” He looked at both of us with a cunning smile and added, “you can now buy any document you need, as long as you know the right person and have enough zloty to pay for it.”

“How much would it cost?” Giulio asked promptly.

“I believe that this kind of a document would cost about three thousand zloty,” he replied, “because there are several people that need to be paid. The most expensive of them is the one that puts an official seal on it.”

All excited, Giulio exclaimed, “It is the best solution next to the real thing! After all, we will be cheating only the arbitrary and unjust rule made by the Soviet authorities. Nobody will be harmed by it.” Rufin understood that his proposal was accepted.

Then Giulio said to me in French, “Tomorrow this is the price that I will ask for the jeweler’s lathe.”

“It is too much,” I said, “he will never pay you that kind of money.”

With a very convincing expression on his face, Giulio answered, “I believe that he will.”

“Why are you so sure?” I asked him.

“Well,” he said, “do you remember what else we found on that barge?”

“The engagement and the wedding rings,” I answered and asked, “What does that have to do with the price of the lathe?”

“Do you remember that I told you at that time that it was ‘chance, destiny or the will of God’ that we found those rings?”

“Yes,” I answered waiting further explanation.

“Well, at the same place and at the same time we found the jeweler’s lathe. Yesterday I found that the jeweler was interested in buying it. Today Rufin has an answer to our problem to buy a certificate of marriage and he tells me the price. Don’t you see how it all fits together? It should be ‘chance, destiny, or the will of God!’” he tried to convince me.

Neither Rufin, nor Lidia could understand all our long conversation in French, and I had to recount to them the whole story[6] about what had happened to us. Rufin and Lidia were so impressed with all the coincidences that happened to us: the arrival of Giulio to be with me in our apartment at the exact day before the Germans evacuated the camp; our finding the engagement ring and the wedding rings, and the lathe on the barge; the snapped rope that prevented us from going to Czestochowa; my mother and I being drafted as interpreters in the NKVD camp, and because of that, not being included in the census with the rest of the Soviet citizens for deportation to the Soviet Union. And now, our encountering Rufin and having an item that could be sold to pay for the certificate of marriage document. Both Rufin and Lidia, being very devoted Catholics, concluded, “It’s, indeed, the will of God! Too many coincidences cannot happen only by chance alone.”

Lidia prepared a good hearty dinner. After dinner she served the ersatz coffee with cookies. And all that time the conversation was never centered on food. They were asking us to repeat or to add some details to our story like it was some kind of a miracle that fascinated them. Finally, Rufin said, “It is almost unbelievable how all the events are fitting together like the links on a chain. I believe that I am the next link on that chain. I am so convinced that Giulio will sell that lathe for the three thousand zloty that I will just go ahead and contact my colleagues to prepare the certificate of marriage.” Lidia was nodding her head in a sign of approval.

I wanted to tell him to wait until Giulio had the money. I was afraid what would happen if he could not get that price from the jeweler. Where then we would get so much money? But the consensus of Lidia with her husband’s decision put me at ease. I thought, “If they can accept the risk, I can accept it too.”

Rufin asked us to give him our documents and he copied all the information that was needed to fill in the standard form for this document. The last information he asked, “What date you want to have on your certificate of marriage?” And he specified, “It had to be after the date that the Polish took over the government.” Giulio and I agreed on March 17, 1945. When Rufin finished writing, we saw that it was time for us to leave to catch the last train home.

In saying “good-bye” we finally acknowledged Lidia’s cooking skills by complimenting her on a delicious dinner. Rufin came with us to the streetcar stop and promised to have our document ready for the next Saturday and invited us to come again the next Saturday and to stay with them overnight and Sunday, which we accepted.

During the trip home Giulio’s excitement was so contagious that I also began to believe that it was already a sure thing that we would have this long-sought certificate of marriage.

Giulio reasoned, “We know that we were married on the twenty-fifth of January nineteen-forty-five, the day when we found the wedding rings on the barge. Who cares if this marriage certificate Rufin will buy for us is a fake, as long as it serves our purpose of obtaining a visa for you as my wife to enter Italy. With the confusion of all the people returning home after the war, nobody will check it anyway. In Italy we will get married right away in the church, just to have our marriage legally registered to be in compliance with all the legal civil laws and for the legitimacy of our child.”

When Giulio and I entered our apartment, we were both beaming with joy. “I can tell,” said my mother, “that you had a very good time at your friend’s home. You both look so happy.”

“Yes, Mama!” we answered together.

“We also have a very good news,” said Giulio. “Lala, tell it to Mama in Russian so it will be easier for her to understand.”

I simplified it to one sentence, “Rufin will buy us a certificate of marriage.”

My mother looked at me, then at Giulio, with a puzzled expression on her face. We understood that I had oversimplified too much and that she needed more details to understand it. After I told her all the details and she finally grasped that it was a fake document, she said, “But it is not a legal document. What will happen if the authorities check it?”

“*Maman*,” replied Giulio calmly, “we will not show it to the Soviet authorities and not even to the Polish authorities. We will go to Prague in Czechoslovakia to the Italian

consulate. How can they check it with the small town of Zabrze at this time when there is no telephone communications or mail service between these countries?" And he added with confidence, "As long as there is an official seal on the document, nobody would question its authenticity."

My mother was more reassured by Giulio's confidence, than by his reasoning. Then she suddenly asked, "How much will it cost you?"

Giulio and I looked at each other, trying silently to agree who would give her the answer. I pointed a finger at him, "You tell her."

Giulio began very cleverly without shocking her right away with the price, "You remember when I brought home that little machine from the barge and you asked me what I would do with it? Well, you should also remember that the last time we were at the jeweler, he told me that he was interested in buying it. That money will pay for the document."

"How much money?" insisted my mother.

I answered calmly, "Three thousand zloty."

"Three thousand zloty?! Are you serious?" she asked in disbelief and looking at Giulio said with indignation, "Your friend is a swindler! He enticed you to come to visit him and is using you to make a profit! Have you tried to bargain with him?"

We waited until she expressed her righteous anger at the exorbitant price. Then Giulio calmly told her, "Rufin is not making any money on it. He knows people that can make any fake document and he knows that this is the price they are asking. It takes more than one person to do it and all of them need to be paid. He offered us the only solution to our problem. You should be happy that he is helping us, instead of accusing him."

My mother was still suspicious about the deal, but gave up arguing. Then she asked, "Are you sure that the jeweler will pay you so much for that machine?"

"I am sure that he knows how much it costs, and it is definitely more than three thousand zloty."

"Then you should ask much more for it and let the jeweler bargain, going down in price little by little," my mother suggested drawing on her experience on the market.

"Of course," Giulio agreed, "don't you worry, I have learned from you how to bargain."

Giulio collected all the auxiliary parts to the lathe and placed them in his military backpack. Then I helped him wrap the lathe in a soft blanket and tie it with cord. Giulio went in the cellar and brought up the cart he made to haul the items to the market when we used to walk on the country road to Gleiwitz.

"We are lucky that we can travel now by train from Laband," I commented. Giulio tied the package to the cart with the cord; then he caressed the package by stroking it gently and said, "Here is the payment for our certificate of marriage."

The next day when we arrived to the jeweler, he carefully inspected the jeweler's lathe and all the accessories. He said that he couldn't find one accessory that was important. Giulio told him that he didn't have it. But he added that he knew how to work on this kind of machine, and that it was in good working condition, and that the missing accessory was not essential, but needed only for some specific type of work.

Then they began to bargain for the price with me translating some of their comments, except the price, which they both understood in Polish. Giulio asked for five

thousand zloty and the jeweler told him to go away and find another place to sell it.

"How much are you willing to pay for it?" asked Giulio patiently.

"Two thousand five hundred zloty," answered jeweler.

"You know very well that it cost much more then that!" Giulio replied and conceded, "Four thousand zloty."

"No, no. It's too far from my offer," the jeweler said.

"Listen," said Giulio in a conciliatory manner, "I can go down to three thousand five hundred zloty and no more. You know that it is a bargain for you. But we need that much money to go to Prague to the Italian consulate."

The jeweler complained again about the missing accessory. But Giulio didn't answer and was waiting to hear another offer. There was a pause in the bargaining. The jeweler probably felt that Giulio was serious with the last price and said, "Three thousand two hundred zloty and, if you are serious that you are going to Prague, I will give you some extra in Czech money for the watch springs. They will be handy to have when you are there."

Giulio said, "Agreed!"

They shook hands. The jeweler went in the store's back room and in a few minutes returned with the money. Giulio gave the money to me to put in my pocketbook and then said to the jeweler, "Thank you very much."

And the jeweler said, "Have a good trip to Prague!"

We both thanked him again, and saluted in Polish.

We went to the market and since we hadn't brought anything to sell, Giulio decided he would look for a camera. "Last week your mother told me to buy one and I wanted to buy one for a long time. But I never was able to find a good one. Today I have plenty of time to look." Indeed he had good luck and found a German-made camera with a very good lens; in addition, it also had one roll of new film in it. He bought it right away as a reward for a good deal with the jeweler. Giulio also found a bottle of wine to bring to Rufin when we went to stay with them for the weekend.

We returned home happy with the three thousand zloty that we needed for the certificate of marriage and the camera ready to take pictures. My mother congratulated Giulio on his excellent bargaining skills.

The next Saturday afternoon Giulio and I traveled again to visit Rufin and Lidia in Michalkowice. We arrived there early in the evening and they were waiting for us to have supper together.

The first thing Giulio said to Rufin, "We have the three thousand zloty. Did you get the document?" Rufin pulled an envelope out of a drawer and gave it to Giulio, who immediately opened it and we inspected it together. It was a standard certificate of marriage with the date of registration of marriage on March 17, 1945 between Giulio Verro and Olga Gladka[7] in the Office of the Civil Status of the Town of Zabrze, Poland. It had a proper office seal and all the signatures that were required on the official legal document. Giulio gave Rufin the three thousand zloty and they shook hands to complete the transaction.

Giulio embraced me and said, "Now we only have to find out how we can go to Prague to the Italian consulate."

Rufin warned us, "You should not use this document anywhere in Poland; especially do not show it to the Soviet authorities, or to the NKVD agents in the camp

where Olga is working, because it could be easily traced and found not to be registered in the Town Hall of Zabrze. Then you and all the people involved in making this document would be in big trouble." We promised that we would be very careful.

During supper and the rest of the evening we were all in a very good mood and our conversation was flowing, helped by the little wine that we had with our meal as a toast for a successful transaction and for good luck for Giulio and me when we got to Prague.

Lidia and Rufin were happy that he made it possible for us to have hope to remain together and, they especially rejoiced that maybe our child could be fortunate to have both a mother and father. Lidia said with envy in her voice, "You don't know how lucky you are to be blessed with a child right away." Then she paused for a while and, looking at Rufin with sorrowful eyes as if she was asking for his forgiveness, she confided, "When we got married, we wanted so much to have children. But in our ten years of marriage I have not been able to have a child. It has been such a disappointment for both of us." Rufin didn't want to dwell on this topic and changed the conversation to something else.

As we talked about how to arrange our trip on the train to Prague, Rufin told us, "You probably can't do it immediately because you need to have a visa to cross the border. This is not possible now because there is no Czechoslovakian consulate yet in Poland."

"I am registered with the Polish Red Cross for the repatriation of the Italian prisoners of war," said Giulio. Then he asked Rufin's advice, "Do you think that I can use this marriage certificate to register Olga as my wife with the Red Cross?"

"Of course," replied Rufin. "The Red Cross is not a governmental organization and I don't think that they would check on the authenticity of the document. However," he warned, "don't give them the certificate to keep; just show it to them, and only if they ask for it. And, most important, don't tell them that she is from the Soviet Union because they could also have restrictions imposed on them by the Soviet authorities."

Giulio said, "We may easily say that she is French, since that's the language we speak together."

"You know," reflected Rufin, "traveling under the Red Cross supervision with a large group of Italian prisoners of war is the best solution for you because you probably will not need to have individual visas." Then he added, "When you go to register Olga at the Red Cross office, it would help to bring several packages of cigarettes as a gift for the Red Cross employees."

After hearing about the advantages of the Red Cross, I commented, "The Red Cross would probably accept me as Giulio's wife for the repatriation. But, if at the border I am asked to show my documents, it will be impossible to conceal that I am a Soviet citizen."

"Czechoslovakians would not check the Red Cross train," commented Rufin with confidence. "That's why I said that this is the best solution for you to travel with the Red Cross."

"Stop worrying," Giulio calmed me, "that's not the biggest problem. So far everything is going well. We shall find out how to solve it when we need to."

Then he expressed his worry, "I only hope that the Red Cross will repatriate us before the month of November when we expect the baby to be born. It would be much

safer than traveling with a small baby, especially in the cold weather. Besides, I would prefer that the child be born in Italy after we have our church wedding."

Lidia, who until that time was listening quietly, suggested in her pleasant gentle voice, "Tomorrow morning, when we go to church, we all shall pray to God to assist you in reaching your destination safely." Then she added, "It's time to go to sleep if we want to get up in time for the early morning service."

Rufin and Lidia had a huge king-size bed that occupied almost half of the bedroom space. Lidia told me that she and I would undress first and climb into the middle of the bed on the fluffy feather mattress, and then Rufin and Giulio would join us on the two opposite sides. And that how all four of us slept in one bed that night. There was plenty of room, but I cuddled close to Giulio as I was used to doing in our narrow bunk bed.

The next morning Giulio woke me up with a kiss, "Good morning, Sleepyhead, it's time to get up. The bathroom is all yours. Everybody is already dressed and waiting for you to go to church. Rufin and I are outside and Lidia is setting the table for the breakfast that we will have when we return from the church."

In my ignorance of the Catholic church customs I asked, "Is it so late that we cannot have a breakfast before going to church?"

"No, silly girl," answered Giulio shaking his head, "it's because Lidia and Rufin cannot eat before having communion."

Then I asked another silly question, "Will you have communion too?"

"No," Giulio patiently explained, "I cannot have it because I didn't go for confession yesterday."

I concluded in resignation, "How complicated are your Catholic church rules."

We found the church packed with people. There were no benches to sit on and most of the people were praying kneeling on the hard floor. The Mass was in Latin and Giulio could participate in it because he knew when to cross himself and when to say "Amen." I was trying to cross myself after him, but I was making my crosses from right to left according to the Orthodox custom. When we exited from the church, Lidia introduced us to her parents, who invited us to visit them that afternoon.

On our way home, Giulio told Rufin, "Polish are very devoted Catholics, much more than the Italians. I never saw so many people kneeling on the floor and praying so fierily in our churches." And he asked, "I am curious if it was always like this, or is it because the people are thankful that the war is over?"

"The Polish are very religious people," answered Rufin, "they were praying like this before the war, during the war, and now that the war has ended."

"I think," Giulio explained, "that many Italians feel anti-church and anti-priests because Italy was dominated for so many years by the Vatican."

After the hearty breakfast Giulio and Rufin went for a walk and Lidia and I remained in the kitchen. While I helped her with the dishes and she busied herself preparing Sunday dinner, we had plenty of time to talk.

She complained to me, "Rufin is very unhappy that we cannot have children. All my prayers and the candles that I have placed in the church, and even our pilgrimage to the Madonna of Czestochowa asking her for a miracle didn't help." And she told me again, "How fortunate you and Giulio are to have a baby. I am so glad that Rufin had an opportunity to get you the certificate of marriage. It should help you to remain together

and to take care of your child."

I replied, "Giulio and I are so grateful to Rufin that there are no words to express it."

"Well," said Lidia, "Rufin told me so many nice things about Giulio and his friend Bruno when they worked together at the *Presswerke* in Laband. He respected them very much. He would have helped Giulio in any way he could. But when he found out that you were expecting a baby and the Soviets would not allow you to get married, he didn't hesitate to take a risk in getting the document for you."

"Can you believe," I told her wondering myself, "that it was by pure chance that we saw Rufin at the streetcar stop only one week ago?"

"Maybe it was not chance," said Lidia. "Maybe it was providence that guided you and him to be at the same time at the same place."

"Yes," I answered, "when it is hard to explain something by chance alone, one begins to believe in providence."

Giulio and Rufin were out walking for a long time and Lidia and I had a chance to get to know each other by sharing our thoughts and concerns.

"How long will you be working for the NKVD camp?" Lidia asked.

"I am afraid that it will not be for long," I replied. "Lately we are asked to work only once or twice a week and even then the number of German men is so small that in a few hours we are done registering them. My mother and Giulio are going to the market in Katowitz two to three times a week. My mother has learned the Polish market lingo and has become very skillful in buying and reselling all kinds of items and in bartering them for food. She also receives orders from the NKVD doctor, doctor's assistant, and other NKVD officers to sell or buy some items and food."

I didn't tell her that they gave her the gold coin to sell, but explained that they also asked her to buy some items they wanted to take home as presents or for themselves.

"She became a real businesswoman," Lidia concluded.

I replied, "Yes, you can call her that. The most important thing is that until now she and Giulio have managed to provide us with good food and have kept the NKVD officers happy."

I suddenly thought about the departure to Prague and said, "But now we have the problem of how to keep my mother from being returned to the Soviet Union. Giulio cannot register my mother with the Red Cross to be repatriated with the Italian prisoners of war. Nobody would risk, including the Red Cross, to list a Soviet citizen because she has only a Soviet passport and a German identification card where it is stated that she is from the Soviet Union. We will be lucky if they agree to register me as a wife. It will be difficult for Giulio to smuggle one woman. But two women would attract too much suspicion and then neither of us would have a chance.

"We need to find my mother some place to stay until the Soviet troops leave Poland and no longer impose their orders on the Polish government. She speaks perfect French and could always pass for a French woman who lost her documents. Once normal life begins, she may join my father, if he was able to get out of the Soviet occupied part of Germany; or we could take her to live with us in Italy."

Lidia consoled me, "You found a solution for you and Giulio, which was the most difficult problem. It shall be much easier to find a place for your mother to stay. Let me talk to Rufin and to my parents about this."

By the time Lidia finished preparing dinner and I helped her set the table, Giulio and Rufin returned from their walk. We had a rich dinner for those times, chicken and potatoes baked in the oven, some dessert, and ersatz coffee. During dinner Lidia told Rufin about my concern of leaving my mother behind in Poland. As they talked in Polish, I understood that she was suggesting to her husband to offer their hospitality to my mother.

He didn't express any concern about hiding a Soviet citizen. Rufin's main worry instead was her upkeep. It was a justified and important matter in those difficult economic times having one more mouth to feed. Lidia explained to him what I told her about my mother's marketing experience and she was able to convince him that my mother was capable of providing for herself by trafficking on the market in Katowitz.

Rufin asked me some questions in German about my mother's buying, selling, and bartering abilities and about her knowledge of French. Being satisfied with my answers, he said to me, "Lidia and I decided we would be glad to let your mother stay with us when you and Giulio are able to leave for Prague."

For Giulio it was a complete surprise to hear this offer from Rufin, since I hadn't yet had a chance to tell him about sharing my concern of leaving my mother in Poland with Lidia. He was overwhelmed with the generosity of his friend and his wife and asked them, "How could we recompense for all that you have done for us?"

"Giulio, providence has led you to us," Rufin replied. "It seems that it was meant for us to be one of the links in the chain of events in your life."

Giulio and I looked at each other and had to agree with Rufin's conclusion.

After dinner we went to visit Lidia's parents. They were very friendly and pleasant people and offered us ersatz coffee. They had a large garden where they grew vegetables. Part of the garden had high rose bushes full of blossoms that emitted a sweet scent. Rufin had a camera, which he had bartered from Giulio during the time he was a prisoner of war. And Giulio had purchased a camera the week before on the market. Both made pictures of all of us in the garden to remember that important day in our lives.

Before we left, Rufin also gave us the address where he worked, so we could contact him quicker when the time came for us to depart for Prague. "As soon as your mother is ready to leave," he said, "she should notify me and I will come and take her to our home."

Both Lidia and Rufin accompanied us to the streetcar stop. "You should visit us again," said Lidia before we boarded the streetcar. We promised her to come to say "good-bye" before we left Poland.

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1. This story was recounted so many times to so many people that many details remain vividly in memory.
2. See the chapter "Deportation of Soviet Citizens by the NKVD."
3. See the chapters "The NKVD Camp in Laband" and "The Trip to the Soviet Consulate in Warsaw."
4. See the chapter "Chance, Destiny, or the Will of God."
5. See the chapter "Trip to the Soviet Consulate in Warsaw."
6. See the chapters "The Prince of My Dreams," "Chance, Destiny, or the Will of God," "The Snapped Rope," "The NKVD Camp in Laband," "Giulio's Watch," "The Trip to the Soviet Consulate in Warsaw," and "Deportation of the Soviet Citizens by the NKVD."
7. Polish spelling of the feminine name Gladky.

Chapter 22

Last Day Of Work At the NKVD Camp

By Olga Gladky Verro
Also as remembered by Antonina G. Berezhnaya Gladky

One day at the beginning of September 1945 Captain Komov called my mother and me into his office and told us, “Today is your last day of work here. There will be no more German men processed in this camp[1] and we don’t need the interpreters anymore. Please return your NKVD camp passes.” And with an apologetic expression on his face added, “I am sorry to tell you this, but starting tomorrow you cannot come here to receive your food rations.”

As we were returning our passes, Captain Komov told us, “My work here is also finished and very soon I will be going back home.” He saluted my mother and me by shaking our hands, and sincerely said, “Good-bye, my friends. I appreciated your help with my work here very much. It was a real pleasure meeting your nice family.” Then he looked at me and said, “Olga, I know that you and Giulio are waiting to go to Prague to clear up your mixed nationality marriage situation with the Soviet and the Italian Consulates.[2] I wish you and Giulio the very best when you go there.”

“Thank you very much for your good wishes, Captain Komov.” I replied. “I hope that the trains will begin to go to Prague very soon.”

And my mother said, “We were very pleased to work with such a good person as you. You treated us as equals and not as inferiors. We wish you a good journey home.”

A few days later *Podpolkovnik* Kozhevnikov came to our apartment in the evening and asked me to call our neighbors, the Izsorskis. When they came, *Podpolkovnik* told us, “This house is very close to the camp gate; we need it for use by the camp guards, so both of your families have to move to another place to live.”

Mister Izsorski was very surprised to hear the news, but my mother and I had anticipated this, because we were no longer working in the camp.

Podpolkovnik ordered Mister Izsorski, “You are the interpreter for the Soviet Army unit in Laband and are in contact every day with the Polish Town Government Office. It will be easy for you to find new apartments for both families. You should do this as soon as possible.”

Indeed, Mister Izsorski very quickly found an empty two-story house with two apartments and we and his family immediately moved there. His family occupied the first floor apartment, which had three rooms and a kitchen, and we moved into the second floor apartment, which had two rooms and a kitchen. There was only one bathroom off the first floor entrance hall near the stairs to the second floor, and both families had to share it. There was a small courtyard with a storage shed for coal and wood. In the back of the house there were a few young prune trees that had some small fruit on their thin branches.

Giulio again had to use the cart to transport all our belongings and the furniture

that we found in the last apartment. As he was moving the wardrobe he found several black leather skins on top that were of the grade to be used for making shoes or boots. Giulio decided to also transport the coal that he had moved already twice before, from our neighbors' cellar to ours in the hamlet's apartment, and then to the cellar in the apartment near the camp. But he believed that it needed to be done since we didn't know if we would be still in Laband in the cold month of November when we expected our baby to be born.

About a week after we moved to the new place, my mother, Giulio, and I were returning from the market in Katowitz and walking home from the railroad station. Suddenly a car coming in the opposite direction stopped near us and Captain Komov got out and came toward us, leaving the car door open.

"Finally, I am going home!" he said all excited, which was very unusual for his calm demeanor we were used to seeing at the NKVD camp. "I am in a hurry to catch the train, but as I saw you, I asked the driver to stop because I wanted to say my last good-bye and wish your fine family all the best for the future. It was a real privilege knowing you." He gave each of us a long and warm handshake and quickly returned to the car. As he was entering the car, we wished him a good journey.

Impressed with his gesture of cordiality, my mother commented, "He really respected us; otherwise, he would not have stopped to say good-bye to us when he was in such a big hurry."

After we settled down in the new apartment, my mother and Giulio had to go to the market in Katowitz several times a week to provide food for us since we didn't receive provisions from the NKVD camp kitchen anymore. Lyudmila Larionovna, the doctor from the NKVD camp, visited us when she needed some fresh food and other items from the market. She was also giving my mother gold German coins, one at a time, to be bartered for gold jewelry with the jeweler in Katowitz. When she came to the apartment, she was monitoring my pregnancy and reassured me that when the time came she would assist me with the childbirth.

She told us that several new NKVD officers had arrived in the camp, one of them had a rank of *Polkovnik;* he was taking the place of *Polkovnik* Stepanov, who had been transferred to another NKVD unit. She complained, "We had such a good team of officers before, but things are changing for the worse. The new *Polkovnik* is introducing new, stricter rules in the camp and his officers are treating everybody in a very formal way. *Podpolkovnik* Kozhevnikov told me that there will be many changes in what the new NKVD unit will be doing now and that I should behave very carefully with this 'new crowd,' which he called 'another breed of the NKVD agents.'"

She didn't explain to us what kind of changes would be going on, but she warned us, "Please, from now on, when you bring me merchandise from the market don't come to the gate to ask the guard to call me from the dispensary. I will come here to your place myself to pick it up. This way it will be safer for you and me."

Soon it became obvious that this NKVD camp has been transformed into a camp for Soviet citizens who, probably like us, were in Germany as *Ostarbeitern*. For some unknown reason, at first only the men were brought in; there were no women. My mother and I were concerned that my father and uncle Igor could be among the new detainees, if they were not able to avoid being captured by the NKVD. We decided that we could go near the camp to collect sorrel leaves growing along the camp fence. We

reasoned, “If they are there, they certainly would try to look outside the fence to find out if there was somebody they knew from the hamlet or from the *Presswerke* Laband and to ask something about their families.”

One day, when we were collecting sorrel, one young man called to my mother in Russian, “Aunty, Aunty, listen, do you remember us?”

My mother told me, “Don’t show them that you understand Russian and don’t answer. Look inconspicuous. Do you recognize any of them? Maybe they are from the Oelsnitz *Ostarbaitern* camp and remember us.”

“No, I never saw them before,” I replied “but I am scared. If they know us, they may tell somebody in the camp that we were also *Ostarbeitern*. Anything could happen with the new officers in the camp who don’t know us. They may just grab us too. Let’s get out of here quickly.”

My idea to ask Lyudmila Larionovna to see if our men were in the camp was categorically dismissed by my mother, “We never mentioned to anybody in the NKVD camp that your father ran away from the advancing Soviet Army. It is too risky to do it now.”

From then on, when we tried to see if our men were there, we kept ourselves far from the fence and close to the hamlet apartment buildings. But there was no sign of them and after a while we stopped going there.

My mother and Giulio continued to go to the market in Katowitz and I remained home because Giulio didn’t want me to get tired in the last months of pregnancy. One day in the middle of September when they had gone to the market, I was sitting on the steps of the house enjoying the nice warm autumn day. A young Soviet soldier arrived at the house on a bicycle and saluted me in Russian, “Good day!”

“Good day,” I answered in Russian. There was nothing suspicious about Soviet soldiers coming occasionally to see our neighbor Izsorski, who was the interpreter for the Soviet Army unit in Laband.

The soldier said, “I am looking for a young Russian girl that lives here. Is that you?”

I got scared, thinking he had come to take me to the NKVD camp. I answered quickly, “I am not Russian, I am Ukrainian. And I am not a young girl, I am a married woman.”

The soldier barely took notice of what I told him. He climbed the steps, sat next to me, and right away tried to embrace me. I moved away from him. “Come on, don’t be so bashful,” he said, looking at me like a cat who had found an open jar with sour cream. A strong smell of alcohol from his breath warned me that he was drunk. At that moment I decided that it was safer for me to be outside than to run in the house where he could follow me. And I rushed down the steps to the courtyard.

“Hey, hey! Where you are running?” the soldier called, following me, and he added in a sweet voice, “I only want to make love to you.”

I went to the middle of the courtyard where *Madame* Izsorski could see and hear me from her kitchen window, and said in a loud voice, “I am going to call my husband.” And then warned him, “You better leave me alone. Don’t you see that I am pregnant?”

The last words had an immediate effect on him. He stopped and looked at me as if he was trying to determine if I was telling the truth. Then he uttered several Russian swear phrases and continued to curse as he returned to his bicycle and pedaled away.

I ran upstairs quickly into our apartment and locked the door, just in case he changed his mind. I didn't come out of the house until my mother and Giulio returned home from the market. When I told them about the incident with the Red Army soldier, they both became very upset and started to give me their suggestions on what I should and shouldn't do when they were not home. But most of all, my mother was upset that *Madame* Izsorski didn't come out to help me.

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1. See the chapter "The NKVD Camp in Laband."
2. See the chapter "The Trip to the Soviet Consulate in Warsaw."

Chapter 23

News About Red Cross Convoy

By Olga Gladky Verro
Also as Remembered by Antonina G. Berezhnaya Gladky and Giulio Verro

My mother and Giulio usually went to the market in Katowitz on Tuesdays, when Giulio could meet the other Italians. One week my mother was not feeling well and on that day they decided not to go. But that evening Giulio suddenly told me, “Tomorrow morning I will go alone to Katowitz to find out if the Italians have heard any news about repatriation.”

On Wednesday morning I was still asleep when Giulio kissed me good-bye and said, “Don’t get up, it’s very early. And don’t worry if I return late.”

Later that morning two Polish policemen knocked at our door and ordered my mother and me to follow them to the newly opened Polish police station where they brought many other people of various nationalities. Several policemen were checking documents and ordering all foreigners to leave Poland and go home to their countries. Most foreigner’s reason for remaining in Laband was that they didn’t know how to get home—there was no place where they could receive information on how to do it. The police officers were directing them to go to the Red Cross office in Katowitz or to their consulates in Warsaw, which were responsible for the repatriation of their citizens.

When our turn came almost at the end of the day, I explained to the policeman, “My husband is an Italian prisoner of war. We have already been to Warsaw and today he went to the Red Cross in Katowitz to find out when the Italians will be repatriated.” It seemed that the policeman was satisfied with my answer and he said to just wait for further instructions.

After giving all the foreigners a warning to return to their fatherland, the police released everybody. It was clear that they wanted to scare us, but that they didn’t yet have any authority to force anybody out of Poland, because the Soviets were still in charge.

When Giulio returned that afternoon, he was all smiles and, before saying the usual Italian greeting “ciao” and giving me a kiss, he handed me a small postcard-size paper and said, “Can you read this?”

It was a Polish Red Cross registration card written in Polish and I read the first line, “Verro Giulio and wife Olga, born 1923.” Surprised, I looked at him and asked, “You didn’t have our certificate of marriage with you. How did you register me as your wife?”

Giulio smiled and said, “Four packs of cigarettes, as Rufin had suggested. I tried, and it worked, but they asked me if I had the certificate of marriage, which will be needed for the Italian consulate in Prague; and I told them that I had it at home.”

I read the rest of the document stating Giulio’s vital statistics, “Born: 22-XII-1915 in Pisa. Nationality: Italian. Place of residence: Prisoner’s No. 14477; Lager IV. Departing for: Czechoslovakia and Italy. Registered by the Polish Red Cross in Katowitz. Day 19-IX-1945.” It had a seal of the Polish Red Cross and a signature by the bureau director. And

there was an additional note: “Given as a pass through the border.”[1]

As I was reading it, Giulio was holding me close to him. “Was it that simple?” I asked.

“Yes, it was. The important thing they told me was to come to their office often and to keep in touch with the other Italians, because they had already registered enough Italians and expected to have the repatriation convoy train ready to depart very soon.”

We told Giulio how the Polish policemen had taken us to the Polish police station where there were many other foreigners and that they had warned us all to leave Poland.

“They want to get rid of us,” said Giulio. “You know, it is a burden to feed all these people.”

“Most of all they want to take over our apartments,” I clarified.

“We better start this week to bring to the market and sell all those items that we cannot take with us,” Giulio said.

“I better start tomorrow to sort out what clothes we will take with us,” I added and suggested that we go to bed early because we were exhausted emotionally from all that had happened that day.

From the time Giulio registered both of us with the Red Cross, my mother and Giulio were very busy selling at the market all that stuff that we couldn’t take with us. Giulio went to the Red Cross office several times, but there was no news about the departure.

One day a Polish man came to see us in our apartment. He presented himself as an employee of the Laband Town Hall. He said that they needed our apartment for a Polish family and that we had to move from there as soon as possible. He explained that as foreigners we had no right to occupy property that was abandoned by a German family and now belonged to the town. He didn’t tell us the exact date we had to leave.

We suspected, but my mother was convinced, that this visit was prompted by our neighbor Izsorski, who was living on the first floor. His wife, *Madame* Izsorski, complained many times that they were crowded in their apartment. Every time she mentioned that, she would say, “When you leave, we will take over the upper story to have bedrooms for each member of our family.”

They knew that Giulio and I were waiting to go to Prague, but they were probably losing their patience, not knowing when it would happen. But, most of all, Mister Izsorski was counting on our vulnerability after our work at the NKVD camp had finished and we didn’t have their protection anymore. Besides that, he knew that the Soviet citizens from the hamlet had already been deported and now Soviet men were gathered in the NKVD camp. Since we were not moving from the apartment, he probably decided to put on some pressure to speed up our departure.

After this happened, my mother insisted, “Don’t tell the Izsorskis about the Town Hall employee’s visit and his request that we move from the apartment and especially about the repatriation of the Italians. Don’t show them that we are upset about something; behave cheerfully, as if nothing has happened. Let them guess what our plans are and let them worry about what we are going to do next.”

After that we tried not to encounter them and, when it was unavoidable, we limited ourselves to saying only “Hello” and “How are you?” instead of stopping to chat as we had done before all this happened.

This was especially hard for Giulio, who until now behaved as a real gentleman

with *Madam* Izsorski and their pretty young daughter Aileen. What helped him to overcome this uneasiness was that all members of the Izsorski family behaved somewhat abashedly and also avoided talking to us. My mother concluded, “There is no question, it is them who are trying to get us out of the apartment.”

We knew that we needed to do something about this situation. Besides, the month of November, when the baby would be born, was not far off. And Giulio was concerned about traveling with the newborn baby during the cold weather. On the thirtieth of September, I remember that it was on Sunday, Giulio decided to go to Katowitz again to meet with the Italians and to hear the news about the repatriation.

I was surprised to see him when he returned very early in the afternoon and asked him. “What happened? Didn’t you find any Italians that you cared to talk to?”

Giulio hesitated for a few seconds and then said very cautiously, “We were lucky that I went to Katowitz today, because the Red Cross convoy train leaves tomorrow morning from Katowitz station.”

“Tomorrow morning?!” My mother and I exclaimed together.

“Yes,” said Giulio calmly. “We have plenty of time to get ready; we have this afternoon, the whole evening and, if necessary, the whole night.”

After the news settled in my mind, I suddenly realized that nothing had been said about what to do about my mother and I complained, “We don’t have time to move my mother to Rufin’s house, not even time to notify him that we are leaving.”

Giulio answered again very calmly, as if he had already anticipated my reaction and had rehearsed his answer, “Your mother speaks Polish, she has Rufin’s home address, and she knows that he is working in the Town Hall in Zabrze. All she has to do is travel to Katowitz, which she does every week; from there she can take the streetcar to Zabrze, where she can find him any time on workdays. Rufin told you that he would come and help her with her luggage, if necessary.”

Giulio spoke in a monologue, not giving me a chance to interrupt him. Then he looked at my mother and asked, “Do you think you can find Rufin?”

My mother was overwhelmed by all this rush of events and looked somewhat confused, but she replied, “I hope I can.”

“Of course you can!” encouraged Giulio. And all three of us began to busy ourselves getting ready for our departure.

Knowing that one day we would have to leave Laband, Giulio had bought two used but sturdy suitcases at the market. In one of them I had already placed all layette for the baby and the best pieces of lingerie for me. All I had to pack in the second suitcase were my fall and winter clothes, some of which we had recently bought at the market. Giulio packed all his clothes in his military backpack and rolled up his military wool blanket, which he attached on top of the pack.

My mother urged me to take a few pieces of fabric that we had bought at the market and a piece of wool intended for a suit for my father, which we had brought from home. She said, “You will need a new suit after the baby is born.”

In addition, I took some new bed linen and towels that we had found in our neighbors’ apartment. Giulio didn’t want to have any additional luggage, only what he himself could carry. I had to carry only my large pocketbook with our documents and money and a large market bag with our toiletries and food for a few days of our journey. We were sure that the Red Cross would provide us with some food, but my mother

insisted that we take with us as much as possible from what was in our kitchen.

We finished packing early in the evening and I sat with my mother checking to make sure she had all the documents and addresses in her handbag. We divided the money, leaving all the Polish zloty to my mother and taking with us Czechoslovakian currency. Then we decided to divide the *Deutschemarks*, which were not used in Poland anymore, just in case we needed them on our way through Austria.

My mother also gave me an old Russian five-ruble gold coin that was given to her when she was born by her grandfather Daniyl Berezhnoy, as he used to give to each of his grandchildren. “It should remain in the family,” she said, giving it to me. “Cherish it as a family heirloom.”

Until late in the evening my mother and I talked and talked about what could happen to us and to her. We were mostly trying to anticipate anything that could go wrong and how we could communicate with her in that case. Rufin’s and Giulio’s addresses were to be used to write as soon as the international mail began to function.

“Remember that Papa and Igor have the addresses for Giulio and Monsieur Demey,” I said.

“If they were able to get out of Soviet-occupied Germany,” remarked my mother, “they should write to both addresses.

And I shall write right away to Monsieur Demey and give him my and the Rufins’ addresses.”

“Remember,” I added, “Zoya Litvinova has Monsieur Demey’s address too.”

My mother paused for a while and reminded me, “Lyalya, try to write to me from Prague and, of course, from Italy, as soon as you arrive there; maybe the mail is already functioning.”

“Remember, we will write to you only in French, or in German, and you should answer us in French. Absolutely don’t write in Russian!” I warned her. And we agreed in our letters to use the words “our cousins” to refer to the Soviets.

For a long time it had been clear that we could not take my mother with us to Italy, but now, at the moment of the departure, it suddenly became a reality. We were trying to cope with the imminent separation by accepting the fact that this was the only way that Giulio and I could have a chance to remain together and our child could have both a mother and a father.

My mother told me, “Soon you will become a mother. It is your responsibility to decide what is best for your child, as I am doing now what is best for you. Do you remember, when we had to make a decision to leave our home in Slavyansk, what my father, and your grandfather, said to us at parting? ‘Don’t think about me. I am an old man. I am at the end of my life. Your life is ahead of you. You must do what is best for you.’”

“Yes,” I answered, “I remember it well.”

“Now it is my time to say to you, ‘Do what is best for you and your child.’”

“But what will happen to you?” I asked. “How long can you hide from the Soviets in Poland? What will happen to you if they deport you back to the Soviet Union?”

Giulio, who was patiently allowing my mother and me to talk in Russian, finally interfered and said, “Let’s talk in French so I can understand it too. Maybe I can add my opinion to what you are talking about.”

I translated the main points of our conversation and he approved my mother’s

reasoning and asked her, “Are you sure you can entrust your daughter to me?”

She looked at him and said, “Yes, I am more than sure. I am entrusting to you not only my daughter, but also my grandchild.”

Satisfied with her answer, Giulio said, “Now we should go to bed; we need to have a good rest, tomorrow will be a long day for all of us.”

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1. From the Polish Red Cross registration card.

Chapter 24

Repatriation Of Italian Prisoners Of War

By Olga Gladky Verro
Also as Remembered by Giulio Verro

On Monday, October 1, 1945, was a memorable day – Giulio and I were boarding the Red Cross convoy train repatriating the Italian prisoners of war. Giulio was excited and I was happy and sad at the same time knowing that I was leaving my mother maybe forever. I was afraid about her future and felt guilty leaving her alone in all probability facing deportation to Soviet concentration camps. She busied herself in preparing breakfast for us for the last time and trying to attend to all last details before our departure but I felt her apprehension and resignation to our separation.

We got up early in the morning and left our apartment without saying good-bye to the Izsorski family. My mother said, “They were used to our early morning departures to the market and will not suspect anything right away. And I will not tell them anything until it becomes obvious that you are gone.”

To make sure that no one would detect that I was a Soviet citizen and would not allow me to board the Red Cross train at the railroad station, we agreed to speak only French, absolutely no Russian. On our way from Laband to the station of Katowitz we began to practice. Also, Giulio and I agreed that it would be safer to tell the other Italians in the train that I was French, since I spoke with him in that language anyway.

Although we were sure that our separation was probably permanent, or at least for a very, very long time, during our last moments together neither my mother nor I were able to say anything important or memorable. My mother was repeating to us, “Remember to write to me immediately from Prague and from Italy,” and, “Notify me when the baby is born.” Giulio and I were telling her to contact Rufin right away and were asking her to check to be sure she had his address in her pocketbook.

I reminded my mother, “Tell Lyudmila Larionovna that Giulio and I finally were able to go to Prague to the Soviet consulate, just in case the NKVD officers in the camp become suspicious about our disappearance. Don’t mention to her that we are going to the Italian consulate there! And don’t tell her that we departed on the Red Cross train repatriating the Italians!” Giulio was just shaking his head, listening to all the precautions.

He reassured me, “Once we are on the Red Cross convoy train, the NKVD agents will not chase after you.”

When we arrived at the station in Katowitz a train with passenger cars was already there waiting. It was obvious that it was the Red Cross convoy train, because we could see Italian military uniforms everywhere. But what was threatening to us were the many Soviet Army soldiers with guns across their shoulders who were keeping the crowd of well-wishers seeing off their departing Italian friends under control. There were many people on the platform, mostly women, but they were not allowed to come close

to the cars; near each car door was a Soviet Army soldier.

We stopped on the platform and I told Giulio, “While I am embracing and kissing my mother and saying ‘good-bye,’ you watch to see if the Soviet soldiers are checking documents.”

“No,” he said, “they are only standing next to the men wearing the Red Cross emblem on their sleeves. The Red Cross men are only checking the Red Cross registration cards. They are not asking for any other documents. I think that it is safe for us to board the train.”

He embraced and kissed my mother and said in a very loud voice in French, “*Au revoir! Au revoir!*” And he walked slowly with the two suitcases and the backpack on his back toward the nearest car door. I kissed my mother again trying not to show much emotion, and followed Giulio, holding the Red Cross registration card in my hand.

Indeed, it was the Red Cross man who was in charge of checking the Red Cross registration cards and the Soviet soldier was there to see that nobody else got on that train. The Red Cross man took the card from me and read from it, “Giulio Verro.” And pointing at Giulio, who was dressed in his Italian Air Force uniform, asked, “Are you Giulio Verro?”

“Yes,” Giulio answered.

Then he read, “And *zona*[1] Olga.” And pointing at me, he asked, “Are you *zona* Olga?”

“*Tak*.”[2] I confirmed in Polish.

The Red Cross employee said, “Two more.”

He wrote it on the piece of paper that he was holding in his hand. Then he looked at the Soviet soldier standing at the other side of the car door and said to him, “Documents are in order. Let them board the train.”

The soldier nodded to us and said in Russian, “Climb up.”

Giulio understood that we were cleared to board the train and he helped me to climb up first, pushed up the two suitcases, and then got up himself. We both emitted a sigh of relief after those few minutes of tension when our documents were checked.

The car was not full yet and we were able to find a place where from a passageway window we could see my mother standing on the platform. Giulio opened the window and I stood there for a long time mostly looking at her thin face and skinny figure standing all alone and waving her hand.

I could hear her, “*Au revoir! Ecrive moi!*”[3]

I would answer her, *“Oui, oui... Au revoir Maman...*”[4]

We didn’t dare say anything that could raise suspicion in anyone. I could not cry, and was holding back my emotions for fear of attracting attention not only of the Soviet soldier standing close by, but also of the Italian men in the car. I felt that my heart was tied in a tight knot and once in a while I had to take a deep breath to feel it pumping. Giulio placed the luggage on the upper shelf and then opened another window. We both stood there looking at my mother, waving to her and repeating only, “*Au revoir Maman!”*

Then we saw that all the men in Italian uniforms had left the platform; the Red Cross men gathered together and seemingly were giving the count to their representative, who was probably responsible for the Red Cross convoy train. Then all car doors were finally closed and the soldiers ordered everybody standing on the platform to move back even farther. All began to wave their hands to the Italian men

who were waving back from the open windows. One could hear in Polish, "*Do widzenia!"* and in Italian, *"Arrivederci!"* which both meant "Good-bye." There were a few very long minutes until the conductor gave a signal and the train began to move slowly.

I was trying to memorize the thin figure of my mother standing on the platform and waving to us as she slowly disappeared from my view.

Giulio closed the window, took my hand, and led me to sit on the bench. He embraced me gently and said, "I know how you feel. It is hard. But you shouldn't feel guilty for leaving your mother. You know that there was no other way to do it."

I didn't answer, but just nodded my head. Imprinted in my mind I could see the dimming out figure of my mother…

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1. "Wife" [in Polish].
2. "Yes" [in Polish].
3. Good-bye! Write to me! [in French].
4. Yes, yes… Good-bye, Mother… [in French].

Chapter 25

Red Cross Convoy Train to Prague

By Olga Gladky Verro
Also as Remembered by Giulio Verro

As the train slowly left the station in Katowitz it gradually began to increase the speed. Giulio was sitting close to me holding and caressing my hand to reassure me that we were together. Trying to cheer me up he said, “By the way, the soldiers didn’t board the train; they all remained on the platform. For now you may stop worrying.”

Only then I noticed that in our compartment there were two men in Italian military uniforms sitting on the opposite bench. They were smiling at us. Giulio introduced himself and introduced me as his wife. They told us their names and began to talk very fast in Italian with Giulio. I understood only that Giulio told them that I was French and that I didn’t speak Italian.

I smiled and moved closer to the window to watch; it seemed that train was standing still and countryside was running away.

The Italian speech, most of which I didn’t understand yet, sounded very harmonious, especially as it was accompanied with the rhythmic beat of the train. It produced a calming effect on me. I felt the baby giving me a couple of kicks and I thought, “The baby is reminding me that I have to think about him. That’s what my mother said to me last night.” And I was reassuring myself, “There was no other way to ensure the baby’s right to have both a mother and a father. This was the only opportunity that could allow Giulio and me to remain together. A chance, destiny, or the will of God had created all these events that were favorable for us. If it weren’t meant to be, we wouldn’t be sitting here in this train on our way to Prague.”

Giulio talked with the Italians for a while and then moved closer to me like he wanted to involve me in their conversation and told me in French, “Lala, both of these men were German prisoners of war; they worked on farms for German farmers.” Then pointing at each man he told me their names and their hometowns in Italy. As he was telling me this, they smiled and bowed their heads slightly showing their pleasure in being introduced to me. I bowed my head also to each of them and smiled.

After this introduction, Giulio lowered his voice and said, “I took this opportunity to interrupt my conversation with them because they were becoming too nosy about me and you.” He embraced me and continued to talk in French in a low tone of voice. The Italian men understood that we wanted to be left alone and one of them told Giulio that they would go look in the other compartments to see if they could find somebody they knew.

Early in the afternoon the train arrived at the Polish-Czechoslovakian border. We were expecting that the Czechoslovakian border guards would check the documents. However, before the train stopped, we could see from the windows a long line of Soviet soldiers with guns across their shoulders waiting for the train to stop. Giulio said, “Uh-oh,

look who will be checking our documents! You better pull out our Red Cross card from your pocketbook and give it to me. And you lie down on the bench and make believe you are sleeping. Remember, don't show them that you can understand Russian, and if you have to answer talk in French."

As soon as the train stopped, two Soviet soldiers jumped one in each door on opposite ends of the cars and began to check the documents. I could hear their loud requests in Russian: "*Documyenty!" "Documyenty!"*

I was lying on the bench with my face in the shadow of the little table attached under the window. Giulio sat in the space remaining near my feet. By the sound of their voices and tapping of their boots on the floor of the car I could hear that the soldiers were coming closer and closer to our compartment, and my heart was beating faster and faster from fear. Then I heard the steps toward our compartment and the request in a demanding tone of voice, "*Documyenty!*"

I sensed that Giulio was giving the soldier our Red Cross pass and heard him saying, probably pointing at me, "*Moya zhena."*[1] The soldier pointed the flashlight on my face and kept the light there for several seconds probably to see if I was really asleep. The light penetrated through my closed eyelids and I had a hard time not blinking. Then he removed the light from my face and I felt Giulio taking my handbag and placing the Red Cross pass in it. When he put the bag back on the bench, he pressed gently with his fingers on my leg as a signal that everything was all right. And I felt how the flashlight moved away to the opposite side of the compartment.

"*Documyenty*!" demanded the soldier again, directing his order to the two Italian men. Then I heard his steps moving away and his voice in the next compartment, "*Documyenty*!"

But I didn't move or open my eyes until Giulio told me, "He is gone. You may sit up."

"Not yet," I whispered. "Let me know when the soldiers get out of the car. Then I will get up."

One of the Italians asked Giulio if I was afraid of the Soviet soldiers. "It was just a precaution," he answered. "You never know what kind of orders they may have regarding civilians traveling in the Red Cross convoy train repatriating the Italian prisoners of war." The man agreed with Giulio.

Then one of the Italians began to tell about his experiences with the Soviet soldiers. "As a prisoner of war I worked for a German farmer. When the Soviet Army occupied the region, the Soviet soldiers came to all the farms, took all the German men, and led them away. They never came back. The rumors were that they were taken to the Soviet Union to work.

My farmer and his wife treated me very well. When her husband didn't return home, I helped her plant the crop in the spring, to take care of the field in the summer, and did harvesting before departing. I was sorry to leave the farmer's wife, who couldn't take care of the farm without a man's help." And he added excusing himself, "But I have my family in Italy and want to return to my wife and children."

Giulio commented with the words of wisdom, "It is the rule of war, the conquerors have the right to do whatever they like with those whom they defeated." And he reinforced it with an example, "Germans did what they wanted with the Italians when they took us as prisoners of war and deported us to Germany. Now comes their turn to

be defeated."

I had opened my eyes and was listening to the conversation. I asked Giulio to translate what they talked about. He translated it and told me, "I didn't tell him that we know for sure that his farmer was indeed deported to the Soviet Union." Giulio got up, looked through the window, and said, "All soldiers are out. You can get up."

As he was helping me to get up, the Italian man who talked with Giulio before comforted me in Italian, "*Non avere paura. Tutto va bene, Signora*."[2]

I understood the meaning and answered "*Grazie*."[3]

Giulio and I sat close together and began talking in low voices in French. The talkative Italian understood that he was excluded from our private conversation.

"Well," said Giulio with the sigh of relief, "we have passed the second checkpoint. So far the Red Cross pass is recognized by the Soviet military authorities as a valid document for traveling on this train."

"But the Soviet military are in charge in Czechoslovakia too," I commented and expressed my fear about our next encounter with the authorities. "Let's hope that the Italian consulate in Prague will not request any permission to be obtained from the Soviet consulate."

"I think that our three-thousand-zloty certificate of marriage and your passport with your picture on it to verify your identity should be sufficient for the Italian consulate to give you a visa as my wife," Giulio answered very convincingly.

The train was moving slowly and we sat quietly admiring the countryside in its autumn beauty through the window. The two Italians went to talk with somebody in another compartment. Now that we finally were alone we decided to eat our sandwiches, relax, and talk in a normal tone of voice.

Toward evening when the dim light from the solitary light bulb on the ceiling was barely illuminating the compartment the two Italians accommodated themselves for the night; one climbed on the upper shelf and the other stretched himself on the bench below. Giulio untied his military blanket from his back-pack and laid it on the bench, leaving a space for him to sit near the window.

"You sleep here," he said, kissing me and wishing me good night. I took my sweater from the bag and rolled it to put under my head. Giulio covered me with the loose end of the blanket and tucked it under my feet saying, "It will be chilly during the night." He sat near the window, placed his forearms on the little table, and put his head down on his arms. I knew that he used to rest in that position for about a half-hour after lunch, but I was worried that he couldn't sleep like this the whole night.

"Why don't you climb on the upper shelf?" I asked him. "You will get tired staying like this."

"No," he answered, caressing me gently on the cheek, "I want to be close to you so you will feel secure and you and the baby will have a restful sleep."

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1. "My wife" [in Russian].
2. "Don't be afraid. Everything is all right, Madame." [in Italian].
3. "Thank you." [in Italian].

Chapter 26

Italian Consulate In Prague

By Olga Gladky Verro
Also as Remembered by Giulio Verro

The Red Cross convoy train arrived in Prague early in the morning. Giulio woke me up saying, “We are in Prague.” While he was packing his military blanket, I combed my hair and put on my hat. A man in civilian clothing walked through the car announcing loudly in Italian, “Go out on the platform and follow the orders to go outside the station. You will be transported to town by bus.”

We followed other Italians who were getting out on the platform. Then we saw that there were other foreigners remaining in the other cars. When all Italians were out, I saw that a few young women were among them. It made me feel at ease knowing that I was not the only woman among all these men in Italian military uniforms.

Another man directed us in Italian to go outside the station where some other men would tell us what to do next. Giulio told me, “All these men who are giving us directions are probably employees of the Italian consulate.” Several old buses were waiting outside and we were directed to board them.

It was a beautiful autumn morning and, as we were traveling through the city of Prague, we were enchanted with its old gothic style buildings, which had not been damaged by the war like those we saw in Warsaw. I said, “*’Praga yest krasna...’* are the words in a song that the Czechoslovakian young men proudly sang in the labor camp in Oelsnitz.” And I translated them to Giulio, “Praga is beautiful...”

“It is indeed a very beautiful city,” he replied and added, “I hope they will allow us to go out to see the city.”

The buses stopped near a large brick building, which looked as if it had originally been a school, but during the war had been adapted by the Germans to house their soldiers. We were told to go down a long hall and settle in the rooms equipped with bunk beds and that we could use the showers and bathrooms. Giulio and I had to stay in a room with the other Italian men, who were considerate enough to offer us a bed in a corner near the window, where I could have some privacy.

As we were settling down, someone came to the room and announced, “Listen, young men, there is a cafeteria in the building where we can have some hot coffee.” We all rushed there, because we hadn't had a warm drink since the morning before and Giulio and I enjoyed the hot ersatz coffee without sugar.

An employee of the Italian consulate came in and told us that we would be staying in Prague for several days until the consulate processed all men. He also explained that starting that morning with room number one, all men from each room would be accompanied to the consulate. Therefore, they should all have their military or other identification documents ready. Someone asked if we were allowed to go out to see the city. The employee answered that we were free to go any time after our

documents were processed at the consulate; however, we should return to this building for supper because we could not buy any food in the city without food coupons.

The next morning our room was the first one to go. At the Italian consulate identifying the Italian men who were ex-prisoners of war in Germany was a routine process; after their military documents were checked by the consul, they were issued a special "*Reduce*"[1] document given to the servicemen returning from the prisoner of war camps in Germany. Those men who were civilians and working in Germany during the war were issued temporary passports allowing them to go back to Italy.

After the consul interviewed us, Giulio received his "*Reduce*" document right away. For me, as the wife of an Italian citizen, they needed to prepare a temporary passport based on our certificate of marriage[2] and on my Soviet passport.[3] They asked me for a small photograph to attach to the document. I was lucky to have one photo without eyeglasses that I had made in Laband by one of those automatic cameras that make photos for identification cards. They accepted it. I was told to come back in the morning on the fourth of October to receive my temporary Italian passport.

As we walked out of the consulate, Giulio kissed me and said, "My dearest Lala, Rufin was right. We had no problem in getting your passport. The three thousand zloty were well spent! Now we have two days to see the beautiful city of Prague!" And he added joyfully, "We should consider this trip as our honeymoon trip, maybe somewhat unconventional. But, if you take into account that all our expenses are being paid by the Red Cross and the Italian government, we should not mind about the small inconvenience of staying in a former German military barracks, instead of a hotel."

I agreed and said, "Let's make it memorable!"

We had some Czechoslovakian money that the jeweler had given Giulio for the lathe. We wanted to buy some sweets or cookies, but, as they advised us, everything was rationed and we couldn't buy anything to eat without food coupons, except a cup of ersatz coffee without sugar that we were able to buy in the coffee shop.

Then in the center of the city we found a jewelry store and decided to try our luck there. The jeweler told us that he could sell us only silver jewelry. He showed us several pieces and quoted their prices. Giulio and I decided that we should spend all our Czechoslovakian money to buy something there, because we couldn't use it anywhere else. We selected two large square-shaped silver pins with engraved flowers—one for me, and another as a gift for Giulio's mother.

The rest of the day we enjoyed sightseeing in the city of Prague. We leisurely walked on the old streets and along the Moldau[4] River, which divides the city; we walked across some of the bridges, one of which was the famous Charles Bridge adorned with stone statues of Saint Charles. We also sent a telegram to my mother at Rufin's address and mailed two postcards with views of the city. We wrote in French and in German: "Everything is fine, as we expected. We will write to you when we arrive in Turin. Many kisses. Lala, Giulio." We were not sure that the telegram and the postcards would arrive at their destination, but we thought, if they do, Rufin, Lidia, and my mother will understand the meaning.

In the morning on the fourth of October we went to the Italian consulate to receive my temporary Italian passport. The consulate didn't return our certificate of marriage and Giulio asked to have it back so we could use that document in Italy. But the employee told him that they needed it for their records and that we had to request

the original from the Town Hall in Poland where we were married.

I was upset that they might use it to check its authenticity, but Giulio calmly said, “Don’t worry about it. They will put it in their files and it will be buried forever in the consulate archives, as it should be - it has served its purpose.

”When we walked out of the consulate, we found a quiet place to sit and Giulio, looking at my new document, said, “Lala, this temporary passport is issued to you as an Italian citizen.”

I said, “I didn’t know that the foreign spouse of an Italian would become an Italian citizen right away.”

Giulio translated to me what was written on my Italian temporary passport.[5] I remarked, “But it is written here that this passport is valid only for repatriation purposes.”

“However, this is an official document issued by the Italian consulate,” Giulio replied, “and it will serve us in the beginning just fine. We may use it to register you as my wife at the STIPEL for family benefits and medical insurance. We also can show it to my parents so they will see that we are married and they will accept you as my legitimate wife. As you can see, this document is better then our Polish three-thousand-zloty certificate of marriage, which nobody would be able to read in Italy. It will serve its purpose until we get married in the church and receive an official certificate of marriage.

The rest of the morning we went sightseeing again and visited one church where we kneeled and thanked God for helping us to remain together. We returned to the dormitory for lunch, as we were advised by the consulate employee to be back at that time. And there was a good reason for it. The Italian consulate was eager to send the Italians to the next destination point as soon as possible.

By the end of the day on the fourth of October 1945, all Italians who had arrived there from Katowitz were put on the same Red Cross convoy train that had brought them to Prague.

That train waited for them on the back tracks of the station. Other nationals who didn’t have their consulates in Prague remained in the cars waiting for the Italians. We understood that this was the reason why the processing was done in such a hurry—it was a burden to feed them all.

Now the convoy train’s destination was Munich, Bavaria. Because the railroad tracks had not been repaired everywhere after being damaged during the war, to reach Munich the convoy train had to travel on therepaired tracks through Austria. On the Czechoslovakian-Austrian border our documents were checked by Austrian border guards; and on the Austrian-German border by the American soldiers.

Since all the Italians had their documents issued by the Italian consulate in Prague and most men were wearing Italian military uniforms, the checking of the documents was only a formality; everybody just waved their documents in the air and that was the end of it.

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1. Ex-serviceman [in Italian].
2. See the chapter “The Three Thousand Zloty Solution.”
3. From the the Soviet Passport.
4. Czech name of the river is Vltava. It is an affluent of the River Elbe.
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Chapter 27

Italian Consulate In Prague

By Olga Gladky Verro
Also as Remembered by Giulio Verro

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3. From the the Soviet Passport.
4. Czech name of the river is Vltava. It is an affluent of the River Elbe.
5. From the Soviet Passport.

Chapter 28

Finally Going Home

By Olga Gladky Verro
Also as Remembered by Giulio Verro

Early in the morning all the Italians waiting for repatriation at the Assembly Center in Munich were ordered out into the courtyard. They were given one loaf of bread each and some American canned food as they boarded trucks to be transported to the railroad station. The last leg of our journey to Italy started with jubilant men cheering and singing as they traveled through the city's streets.

When we were traveling on the convoy train to Italy, Giulio embraced me and said, "My dearest Lala, finally we are sure that we are going home."

The mood of the Italians returning home was elevated and was reinforced by the sounds of Italian songs in each car. The excitement and the joyful character of the Italians were contagious and uplifting.

The Austrian border police walked through the cars checking only by sight that there were only Italians on the train. When the train had passed the station at Innsbruck, right before the Austrian-Italian border, it stopped and everybody was ordered to get out because the railroad tracks were not yet repaired after being damaged during the war. There were several American military trucks that transported our whole group across the Alps.

"Isn't this a beautiful honeymoon?" Giulio asked me.

"Yes, my dearest," I confirmed and added, "it is also a breathtaking view. This is the first time in my life that I have seen such high mountains!"

When the trucks were passing across the Austrian-Italian border, there was a lot of cheering and rejoicing by the Italian men returning to their homeland. A short distance from the border there was a train waiting for the returning sons of Italy.

As we were traveling through the stations in northern Italy, the train was stopping at even the smallest stations to let out those men who were arriving at their destination or who needed to catch connecting trains to their hometowns.

In that mountainous part of Italy there were many apple orchards bordering the railroad tracks. The trees were full of colorful fruit bending their branches and tempting the men who hadn't eaten them for more then two years. When the train would stop, the more audacious men were jumping out and running to the orchards, collecting the fruit inside their shirts. One young man in our compartment was among the brave ones who dared to collect a few apples. When he returned, he selected a bright red one, shined it with his sleeve, and presented it to me. "For you, Signora!"

I accepted it saying, "*Grazie*," and began right away to bite the juicy and sweet fruit.

When the train was stopping at the large stations, Giulio was telling me their names, as if they were milestones leading closer and closer to his hometown:

“Bolzano...” “Trento...” “Verona...” “Brescia...” Finally, in the late afternoon we arrived at the big station in Milan. Giulio said, “Here we will get off and take another train to Turin.”

At the station in Milan a large number of men got out of the convoy train to take the connecting trains to their hometowns. All together they went to the ticket office to find out how they could get the tickets for those trains, since most of them were ex-servicemen returning from German prisoner of war camps or other labor camps, and they didn’t have any Italian money. The cashier told them that their *Reduce* document and provisional or temporary passport from the Italian consulate were sufficient to show the conductor on the train and on the streetcars to ride without tickets.

We had about forty-five minutes to wait for our train and Giulio decided to walk out of the station to have a look at the city. Outside he saw an old man selling hot chestnuts that he was roasting on the grill. Giulio searched his pockets for the few Italian coins he had and asked the old man if it was enough to buy some chestnuts. The man took a newspaper page, made a cone-shaped bag, and put a few chestnuts in it.

I had never tasted roasted chestnuts before. Giulio peeled one and presented it to me as some kind of a delicacy. As I put it in my mouth and began to chew it, I forced myself to swallow it and said, “I don’t like it. It tastes very strange, like a sweet potato. Sorry, but I cannot eat another one.” Giulio was very disappointed that my first experience with the popular Italian delicacy was unsuccessful, but he ate the remaining chestnuts with obvious pleasure.

We returned to the station and boarded the train for Turin just by showing Giulio’s *Reduce* document and my provisional passport. As we were traveling this last span of road leading to his hometown, Giulio became restless and was continually looking from the window to see where we were. Soon the evening darkness began to prevent him to recognize the places. Finally, the lights of the city began to appear, and the other passengers started to move toward the exit. Giulio collected our luggage from the top shelf and told me to follow him toward the exit door.

“This is the Porta Nuova Station of Turin,” he told me as we walked out of the train onto the illuminated station platform. “I cannot believe that our journey is over!” exclaimed Giulio with emotion. “My dearest Lala, we have finally arrived in Turin! We are home!”

Chapter 29

Meeting Giulio's Mother

By Olga Gladky Verro
Also as Remembered by Giulio Verro

On Saturday, October 13, 1945, late in the evening when it was already dark, we arrived at the Porta Nuova Station in Turin[1]. From there we took the streetcar; Giulio showed his "*Reduce*" document[2] to the conductor and he allowed us to ride without tickets. The streetcar was packed with passengers. Giulio, who was carrying his military backpack and two suitcases, slowly made his way toward the rear exit door by patiently asking each standing passenger, "*Permesso, permesso.*"[3] Holding tight at the corner of his coat I closely followed him, squeezing myself quickly into the space he made moving sideways with the luggage.

> As the passengers moved forward toward the exit, Giulio reached the streetcar's rear landing and placed the suitcases on the floor, leaving for me space between them and the window, where I was protected from hastily exiting passengers. We stood there all the way until we reached a streetcar stop on a corner of Corso Novara and Corso Palermo.

"We are home!" exclaimed Giulio joyfully and got out first with the luggage and then helped me out. He placed the suitcases on the sidewalk and after deep sigh of relief gave me a long tender kiss. "My dearest Lala, we are finally home!" He said, "This big building on the corner is *Corso Novara, venty-cinque.*"[4]

As we entered the main entrance door of the five story apartment house, Giulio asked me, "Do you mind to wait for me here? I think it will be better if I go first by myself to see what the situation is in my home and to prepare them that I am not alone, that my wife is with me."

"If you think that this is the best to do," I replied, "I don't mind to wait."

He gave me a quick kiss on the cheek and left with the entire luggage, except my bag and pocketbook. I heard his footsteps resound higher and higher on the staircase and finally stop.

I found myself standing near the double door main entrance in a long barely lighted hall leading to the staircase. At once I was overwhelmed by the strong pungent odor of urine emanating from a wet floor on the opposite side of the door. I opened my side of the door and held it open with my back. This allowed me to breathe fresh air. I was afraid to get out and stand alone on the barely lighted sidewalk and decided to remain protected by the shadow in the middle of the threshold. A woman came to the door and I stepped inside to let her through. She looked at me, as if trying to recognize who I was, and without saying anything walked toward the end of the hall and disappeared on the staircase.

When my eyes got used to the dim light, I walked to the other end of the entrance hall where I could see an open¬ing toward a courtyard. I thought, "Maybe there I can breathe better." I walked slowly, keeping myself close to the wall. Under my feet I felt

gritty concrete floor and here and there I stepped on the pieces of paper, empty cigarette packages and butts. When I reached the end of the hall, I found myself on the inner corner of the L-shaped building with a dark rectangular courtyard and a wide staircase on the right. Looking up I saw on both sides of the building faint glimmers of light peeking through the narrow windows. The shadows of the continuous railings of long balconies on each floor were running parallel to each other and connected in the corner at the staircase. A small patch of the dark sky with a few pale stars was visible above the roofs of the neighboring multistory buildings enclosing the courtyard.

It seemed to me that I was waiting for a long time and I began to worry that something had happened in Giulio's family. Then I heard the sound of footsteps, starting up high and rapidly coming down the staircase. Giulio came running toward me. "I did as quickly as I could," he said. "My mother is alone in the apartment. This makes it easier to introduce you. I told her that you don't speak Italian and that you and I speak French. You just tell her '*Buona sera,*[5] *Mamma!*' Anything else I would translate for you."

Giulio took in one hand my bag and with the other took me under my arm saying, "I will help you to climb these four flights of stairs. They are rather steep and you are carrying our baby, too."

When we finally reached the fifth story landing, I was out of breath and told him, "Let me catch my breath before we go inside the apartment. Was your mother surprised when you told her about me?"

"I think that she was so surprised and happy to see me that anything else I told her didn't make much effect on her."

We walked almost to the end of the right side balcony passing two doors, and then Giulio opened the third door and let me in. The electric light shining from the bare light bulb dazzled me and I squinted my eyes for a few seconds. Giulio led me toward his mother who was putting a pot of coffee on the metal woodstove and said, "Lala, this is my mother. Mamma this is my wife, Lala."

"*Buona sera*, Mamma!" I said in Italian.

"*Buona sera*," she answered.

And we cautiously embraced each other.

Giulio told me to remove my coat and used that moment to tell his mother, "Mamma, as you can see, in about one month we are expecting our baby to be born."

This time I saw a surprise on his mother's face and she embraced him, telling something in Italian. Then she came toward me and this time embraced me with more sincerity.

Giulio invited me to sit down at the table and told his mother, "Lala is very tired. We had a long trip. In the streetcar we stood on our feet all the way from Porta Nuova Station. After we drink some coffee, she should go to sleep right away." Then he asked her, "Where we will be sleeping, here on the couch?" She did not answer right away. "Well, what is the matter?" Giulio prompted.

"Domenico sleeps on the couch," she said. Then with the sorrowful expressions on her face added, "He doesn't live any more with his wife."

"Oh," Giulio said, surprised with this news, "it complicates the situation."

"For tonight you shall sleep with your brother on the couch as you used to sleep before," she replied; then pointing at me added, "And she could sleep in the bedroom on my side of our bed and I would sleep in the middle. Tomorrow we shall think how to

solve this situation."

Giulio explained me the problem, "Tonight you will sleep with my mother and father in their bed. You should not worry," he reassured me, "it is a big bed like the one the four of us slept in at Rufin's home.[6] It is only for tonight; tomorrow we shall find a better solution to our sleeping accommodations."

His mother excused herself, saying that they had already eaten their supper and there was nothing left for us to eat, except some bread. She served us a cup of hot chicory coffee and said, "I am sorry, but we don't have any sugar in the house. I will give you the bread."

Giulio stopped her by saying, "Mamma, we have bread given to us by the Americans in Munich for the trip." He took from my bag the remaining dark bread and we ate a slice with the coffee.

His mother tasted a piece of our bread. "Besides that it is dark," she commented, "it isn't baked well, it's raw inside."

Giulio laughed, "You should have tasted the kind of bread they were giving us in the German prisoners of war camp!"

Hearing the word "camp," his mother said, "By the way, a couple of weeks ago we received a letter from your friend Bruno Zanobini. He wrote us that he recently returned from Germany and notified us that you were in good health and that you remained there with one Russian family. We were guessing that there was probably some very good reason for you to stay there."

"Now you know the reason," said Giulio touching gently my hand. Then he told me that Bruno returned home only recently and translated the substance of his letter. We understood that, wherever he was in Germany, the repatriation didn't start there much earlier then in Poland. We were happy that he was home.

After we finished drinking coffee Giulio told me that before I left to sleep he would accompany me to a latrine, which was next-door, outside on the balcony. The latrine was a cubicle with concrete walls and floor and had a simple hole in a step elevation from the floor, but high under the ceiling was a water thank that could be flushed by pulling a metal chain. Giulio waited for me on the balcony. When I returned to the kitchen I washed my hands and rinsed my face under a faucet of a gray stone sink located in the corner on the left side of the door.

Meanwhile, his mother prepared a bed in a bedroom. It was a huge king-size bed that occupied more than half of the room. Giulio placed our luggage between the door and the chair standing in the corner close to the bed. He told me to lie down at that edge of the bed. In giving me a good night kiss he reassured me again not to worry. I was so tired that as soon as he closed the door I fell asleep almost immediately and slept until the next morning without hearing anything that was going on in that small apartment.

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1. See the chapter "Repatriation of the Italian Prisoners of War."
2. "Ex-serviceman."
3. "Allow me, allow me" [in Italian].
4. Twenty-five, Novara Avenue, [in Italian].
5. "Good evening" [in Italian].
6. See the chapter "The Three Thousand Zloty Solution."

Chapter 30

The First Day Events

By Olga Gladky Verro
Also as Remembered by Giulio Verro

The next morning after our arrival in Turin Giulio woke me up with his tender good morning kiss, "*Dormigliona,*"[1] he greeted me, "you slept all night. It's time to get up. It's Sunday and everybody is up for a long time. Dress-up here, because Domenico and Mamma are in the kitchen where you can wash your face at the kitchen sink. Babbo had already gone to work."

"Br-r-r," I exclaimed shivering as I sat on the edge of the bed. "It feels cold coming out from under the warm quilt."

"Well," replied Giulio, "during the night they don't leave the stove on. Mamma told me that it is hard to find wood and it is very expensive." Leaving the room he suggested, "When you come in the kitchen say only '*Ciao*'[2] to them."

I quickly put on my dress and sweater, combed my hair and cautiously opened the door. They all were sitting at the table sipping hot chicory coffee. Giulio hurried to my side saying, "Come in, come in, Lala."

"*Ciao*," I greeted timidly looking first at Giulio's mother and then at his brother. They greeted me too.

Giulio introduced his brother to me in French, "This is my brother, Domenico." And, in Italian, "This is my wife, Lala." Domenico got up, ceremoniously kissed my hand, saying something in Italian. I understood it was a pleasantry.

I said, "Ciao, Domenico."

Mother asked me something and Giulio translated it to me, "Did you sleep well?"

"*Si, grazie,*"[3] I answered in Italian.

Domenico laughed and said, "She speaks already Italian."

"She learns fast," Giulio replied. "In no time she will be speaking very well."

I felt awkward not knowing what to do next. Giulio understood and accompanied me outside to the balcony, and waited until I came out of the latrine. Back in the kitchen, to make it easier for me, Giulio told me, "Now wash your hands and face. Here is the clean towel."

He engaged his brother and mother in conversation, making me less conscious of them observing while I was washing myself. When I finished at the sink, Giulio got up, filled a cup and said, "Come and sit at the table to drink some hot coffee."

Domenico said something and Giulio translated it to me, "Wait until I tell my comrade partisans that my sister-in-law is a communist!"

"Go slowly bragging about her," Giulio warned him. "She is Russian,[4] but not a communist."

"No-o?" wondered Domenico. "I thought that in Russia,[5] everybody was communist."

"Well," replied Giulio, "when she learns to speak Italian she will explain to you that this is absolutely not true."

The Mother got up and went to the bedroom. Right away Giulio told me, “Lala, go and help Mamma to make bed.” And I followed her.

Mamma had already opened the only window and the cold morning air rushed into the room. Mamma pulled down the blankets. I helped her on the other side of the bed and repeated all her moves in fluffing pillows, straightening mattress and pulling tight the bed sheets. Then with her hand she showed she wanted me to follow her in the kitchen, leaving bed undone to freshen up in the cold air.

When we came back to the kitchen, Giulio had just finished writing something on a piece of paper. Then he took from his back-pack the envelope which I knew very well; it was his fiancée’s letter in which she wrote that her parents objected to her marriage with him and where she concluded that they might get married only if it will be “the God's will.”[6] He inserted his note and some photographs in her envelope.

“What are you doing?” I asked him.

He answered me in French and then repeated it in Italian for his mother, “I just wrote to my fiancée: ‘It was not the God's will for us to marry. I got married to another girl and am expecting soon to be a father. Please, return all my letters and photographs; also the picture of Madonna that my uncle Pietro gave us as a wedding present.’” Then he added, “I am sending Domenico to bring this note to Elsa. This should be sufficient to put an end to any possible arguments and recriminations.”

His mother quickly added, “You forgot to ask her to return the engagement ring.”

“No,” Giulio answered. “She should keep it. I broke the promise, not she.”

The Mother got upset and raising her voice insisted, “It is an expensive ring and you need now the money!”

Very calmly, but firmly Giulio repeated, “No, I said ‘No’, Mamma, and it’s the end of the discussion.”

But the Mother was going on and on, trying to convince Giulio that the engagement ring was expensive; her final argument was, “After all the trouble that Elsa’s family made for you and for us, she does not deserve to keep it.” She was so preoccupied with her argument that she didn’t even see that Domenico put on his warm jacket and left to deliver the message.

To calm her down, Giulio embraced her, and kissing her on the cheek said very calmly, “Mamma, it is my first day at home, let’s not quarrel. I have done as my conscience told me to do it right. Besides, Domenico is already gone.”

“If she is as proud as she was making us to believe,” replied his mother, “she herself should return you the ring.”

“Well, if she returns it,” replied Giulio, “I certainly would not bring it back to her. But knowing how close-fisted her parents are, I do not expect it to happen.”

As his mother calmed down she remarked, “I could imagine their faces when Domenico brings them the news.” And she grinned anticipating their reaction. “Those bigots had the impudence to say that they could not allow their daughter to marry you! I am glad that you paid them in kind and showed them that you didn’t need their precious daughter after all!”

“Mamma, Mamma,” interrupted her Giulio, “I did not do it for revenge to Elsa or her family! They have nothing to do with me marrying Lala. Remember that I was a long

time away from home. I was lonely and met Lala. We fell in love with each other. We shared the good and the bad events and many, many times were close to losing each other. This bonded us even closer."

His mother was surprised that her son didn't have bitter feelings toward his fiancée and her family for having rejected him. "You know Giulio, after the quarrel with her family we kept some contact with her," she explained, "because we didn't know what the two of you would decide when you returned home. She even had sent you a package to Germany. So, I guessed that maybe she still had some hope that her parents would change their minds about you."

Giulio tried to stop her, "All right, all right, Mamma, it's all over. There is no need to talk about it any more." He embraced her again and gave her a kiss on the cheek. This finally calmed her down and she stopped. Giulio kissed her again and then kissed me and said, "Here are the two women who are dear to me."

All that time I was quietly observing their emotional discussion in Italian, which I could not understand, but from some words I figured out that it was connected to Giulio's fiancée and to me. Now that their discussion seemed ended, I asked Giulio, "What it was all about?"

"Please Lala, not now," he replied, "I will tell you later when we are alone."

Giulio went to the bedroom and brought my bag and one of our suitcases into the kitchen. "Let's give Mamma the gifts we brought for her," he told me. "Give her first the silver pin that we bought in Prague."

His mother watched us with curiosity. I searched in my bag and, when I pulled out a small package, she came closer. I extended my hand and gave it to her. Giulio said, "Mamma, this is Lala's gift for you, we bought it in Czechoslovakia."[7]

She carefully opened the tissue paper and admired the pin. "*Grazie*," she thanked me and pinned it on her dark sweater. The shiny metal brightened up her somber outfit.

"It looks good on you," said Giulio. "Go and look in the mirror."

She went to the bedroom and, when she returned, commented seemingly satisfied with the pin, "It is big, but not flashy. Thank you, Lala." She patted me on the shoulder, but didn't kiss me. Much later I found out that giving a pin as a gift was a bad omen by the folk's beliefs and she was not happy about it.

Meanwhile Giulio placed on the table the suitcase where we had all the fabrics that he and my mother purchased during the summer on the market in Katowice. He opened it and said to me, "Let's show Mamma what we brought with us and give her some fabrics as a gift."

Seeing the suitcase with the fabrics, excitement appeared in her eyes. Giulio took the initiative to remove fabrics from the suitcase and explained one by one how he and my mother bought them on the market in Poland. There were several cuts of materials with bright colorful designs and Giulio said, "These are for Lala." And looking at his mother's dark outfit commented, "They are too bright for you, Mamma. Maybe this one with subdued colors would be good for your blouse." He looked at me and asked, "What do you think, Lala?" I nodded approving his choice. He gave it to her.

Then he lifted a cut of blue-gray silk with a novelty weave of crinkled surface forming a design. "What do you think Lala?" he asked me again. "Will it be enough for the Mamma's blouse?"

"I think so," I guessed. "Ask your mother if she likes it."

I was hoping that she didn't, because I liked it very much and was planning to sew it for myself.

She took it and feeling its softness touched it to her cheek. Holding smooth and delicate silk next to her skin, pleasure showed on her face. Placing it against her chest she asked Giulio, "Is this color becoming to me?"

"Yes, very much, he complemented her and explained, "This is a real fine silk made in France. Lala's mother and I bought it on the market from a French woman."

His mother carefully folded the fabric and putting it on the table next to her said to him, "*Grazie*."

When Giulio pulled out a large cut of white cotton pinwale piqué his mother exclaimed, "Ah-h! This fabric will be good for my blouse!"

"There is plenty of fabric here for both of you," said Giulio. Then he asked me in French, "Don't you think so?"

I agreed but added, "Don't forget that we brought this fabric from my home and I want to sew from it clothes for our baby." Giulio translated it to his mother.

"Yes, yes, white will be good for the baby," she agreed, somewhat embarrassed that she thought only about herself.

At the bottom of the suitcase was also a fabric that my mother and I brought all the way from home. It was the navy pure wool Cheviot fabric that my mother bought for my father's suit. I knew from Giulio that his mother was a good connoisseur of wool fabrics, because she selected them for all his suits and a coat when he returned with some money earned as a Legionnaire[8] during the Spanish war. Indeed, as soon as she saw this fabric she grabbed it and held it in her hands, admiring it; then she announced in a tone of voice like she was the one that had the right to make a decision about what to do with it, "Oh, Giulio, this is a beautiful fabric! It is probably enough for a new suit for you!"

"No, Mamma," he interrupted her enthusiasm, "this fabric Lala's mother gave to us recommending that we make for her a good suit that she needs. I have plenty of new suits that we made for me after I returned from Spain. I am so skinny that they definitely would fit me now."

"It is a pity to waste such good material for the woman's suit," she replied, "It will go out of fashion quickly."

"Not if it will be made by a tailor," contradicted her Giulio. "Tailored suits are classic style, they never get out of fashion."

The expression on his mother's face clearly showed that she didn't approve of Giulio's reasoning, or maybe she didn't like to be deprived of making a decision in the matters she was used to until now. At that moment entered Domenico and we abruptly ended our viewing of fabrics.

Domenico announced, "Brother, the mission is accomplished." And he placed on the table the package with the returned photographs, letters, and a roll with Madonna's picture.

With a sneer on her lips, his mother, immediately asked him, "Well, how did they take the news?" The expression on her face showed expectation to hear a description of a dramatic scene that Domenico participated in a short while ago.

But he calmly said, "Well, when I arrived there, they were all dressed up and standing in the room ready to go to church. Of course, they were very surprised to see

me, and especially at such unusual time for a social visit."

Then Domenico recounted the scene, "Elsa asked right away, 'Had something bad happened? There is bad news about Giulio?'

"And I replied, 'No, he is all right, he arrived only yesterday evening from Germany. Here is his message for you.' And I gave her Giulio's letter without saying anything else.

"Standing next to her sister, Rita, Elsa quickly opened the envelope and read the note. Without saying a word to her parents, she put one arm around her sister and they went to another room. Her parents remained standing and didn't invite me to sit down. The Mother asked me, 'What happened to Giulio? Why he himself didn't come?'

"I told her, 'Giulio only sent a message to Elsa and she herself shall explain it to you.'

"The Mother tried several times to engage me in talking about it, but I told her politely, 'I am sorry, Signora, but my brother didn't give me any message for you.'

"Then she asked me, 'How is your mother?'

"'Very well, thank you,' I answered.

"An uneasy tension took over and she attempted to go to see her daughter, but her husband stopped her, 'If she needs you, she will call you.'

"After a while Rita returned with several packets and gave them to me, but Elsa didn't return back. I thanked Rita, said 'good-bye' to all and left. That's the end of the story."

Giulio's mother looked very disappointed; she expected to hear how Elsa and especially her parents reacted to the unpleasant news. Giulio thanked Domenico and then explained briefly to me in French what happened.

I began folding and placing back in the suitcase the fabrics, except those that we gave to his mother, and Giulio joined helping me. When Giulio went to the bedroom to put back the suitcase I followed him. I knew that at that moment he needed a loving hug to alleviate a burden that he had on his conscience.

Notwithstanding that the rejection came two-and-half years ago from his fiancée's side, he still felt that he done wrong to her. For a while we stayed embraced, hugging silently and allowing our bodies to restore the inner equilibrium in our souls by a flow of tender reassurance that we were there for each other. Then Giulio gently placed his palms on my cheeks, kissed me tenderly and said, "Now it's all behind me and that chapter of my life finally is closed. Ahead of us is our whole life together."

He paused for a while and added, "We have a lot to do starting this afternoon when we shall go to our Parish to make a date for our church wedding. We need to be officially married to have all the benefits that the society offers only to those who follow its laws, rules, and traditions. It is not enough any more for us to be bound only by our commitment to each other as a husband and wife. The birth of our child requires us to register officially our union."

"Yes, *Giulyen'ka*,"[9] I agreed.

Before we went back to the kitchen, Giulio warned me, "By the way, Lala, you should know that, as I explained you before, I didn't tell my parents that we are not officially married, I just told them that we were not married in the church and that we need to do it soon, because it will take long time before the regular international postal service is established and we could request our official documents from Poland."

I was surprised that he didn't change his mind and didn't tell the truth to his parents, but I decided to talk about it at some other time.

“Now, let’s go to the kitchen,” he said, “I need to ask Mamma and Domenico about some details for the things I have to do on Monday.”

I replied, “Yes, you will be very busy next week.”

In the kitchen his mother had already began to cook tomato sauce. Her advice to Giulio for tomorrow was strictly practical, “The first thing on Monday morning you should go to the City Hall and register both of you for food coupons, otherwise we cannot even buy the bread for you.”

“First I should go to get discharged from the military service,” Giulio said. “From there I shall go to the City Hall to register us for the residency. I will need my military discharge when I will go there and to the STIPEL[10] Office.” Then he asked his brother half-jokingly, “They didn’t change yet the old Fascist law that orders companies to give servicemen returning from the war their previous jobs?”

“No,” answered Domenico, “until the elections of the new government all the previous laws remain in force.”

“Then,” concluded Giulio, “I shall present myself to the STIPEL administration and ask when I can resume my work.”

“Talking about the fascists,” Mamma changed the subject, and said to Domenico, “Tell your brother how they arrested you.”

And Domenico began to tell Giulio his adventures as a partisan.[11] I could not understand it at that time, but later Giulio translated to me his brother’s storya[12] as he recounted it:

> "Our partisan brigade was working in the city and our task was to transport weapons and ammunition from where they were stored in the city to the designated places where the other partisans would pick them up and deliver to the fighting units. For a while the system worked well because all men and women in each group did not go far from the usual places where they lived and worked, thus not arousing easily suspicions of the people and of the Fascist agents. But, when one member of our group got caught carrying the weapons in the streetcar, during the interrogation he revealed the names of those he knew from our group. Unfortunately, my name was among those he gave to the Fascist agents.

“This happened when I quarreled with my wife, Bianca, and I was living here with my parents. Sometimes here in the apartment I kept overnight some weapons that had to be delivered next day. It was a lucky coincidence that I didn’t have any weapons the night when two Fascist agents came here and searched the apartment. However, they arrested me anyway and brought me to the *Le Nove*[13] where they kept me in prison as I waited to be investigated. There were many political prisoners at that time and the prison was crowded. It was scary when the prison guards were taking people one by one for interrogation and bringing them back badly beaten and covered with blood. And those were the lucky ones, because some were not returning back at all, they either died from the torture or were shot."

“I was visiting him every day,” Mother interrupted him impatiently; she wanted to tell her part of the story. “I was bringing him something to eat, taking it from our rations, because they were scarcely feeding them in prison. It was a tiring trip to get there and it took me more then half-a-day. Do you know how far it is from here?” she asked Giulio, who nodded his head. “I had to take two streetcars to get there.”

Domenico commented bitterly, “But my wife was afraid and she never came to visit me in prison.”

“Well,” his mother said ironically, “in compensation, your partisan girlfriend came

to visit you very often." And then, as if she expected him to deny it, she quickly added, "I saw her there several times. Don't tell me that she didn't know that you were married and had a baby daughter."

"Mamma!" Domenico stopped her sternly. "Don't start again your innuendo that she is a bad girl. Remember that she was putting herself in a real danger by visiting me in prison, because she was a member of our partisan group."

"Nevertheless," his mother tried to continue her argument, "she knew it and..."

"Mamma, *basta*!"[14] Domenico interrupted her briskly; knowing that his mother does not give up easily, he didn't allow her to go on. "Let me finish telling Giulio how I got out of prison."

Reluctantly she allowed Domenico to continue his story.

"I was lucky that Uncle Pietro[15] who, as you know, was a custodian for many years in the Fascist Club of Professionals, was very respected by all its members. He knew several well-known Turin lawyers who were the members of the Club. He pleaded with them to help him get his young nephew out of prison. One of them had a clout in the higher Fascist circles and promised him to do something about me as long as what the Uncle told him was true, that there were no weapons found during the search of the apartment when I was arrested."

"I told Domenico," inserted his mother, "that Uncle Pietro, God rest his soul, was trying to find the way to get him out, but your brother didn't believe that he could help him."

"But, I was wrong," conceded Domenico. "In a few weeks, one early after¬noon, which was an unusual time for the interrogations, the prison guard came and called only my name; I went with him expecting the worst. Instead, I saw my uncle Pietro waiting for me. They let me go in his custody and told him that he would be responsible for my whereabouts, and told me not to be involved with the partisan's activities. He accompanied me home and made me swear that I would keep out of trouble and would not go back with my old crowd, because, he said, nobody would help me the next time if I would be arrested. Anyway, the partisan group could not use my help any more, fearing that I would be under surveillance."

"Tell your brother," prompted his mother, "how lucky you were to be released at that time."

"Oh, yes," Domenico said somberly, "after I came home from *Le Nuove* the political events began to unfold very rapidly. The Fascists were desperate to hold to their power at any cost. At that time no one knew for sure what had happened to all the suspects that were remaining in the prison, they just disappeared and no one of them returned home. But later it became known that without further investigation they all were shot." And he concluded, "I could have been one of them."

"Yes," said Giulio, "these were difficult years everywhere. The whole world got crazy. The human life had no value any more. During the war there are no laws or justice. At any time whoever has the power of the gun has the absolute authority, they make their own rules and do whatever they want with those whom they dominate—the winners rule at will over the losers."

Domenico listened with respect to his older brother's thoughts and when Giulio finished, he asked him with admiration, "Where did you learn to express yourself so eloquently?"

Giulio smiled and gave him the modest answer, “I always listen to how the people who are smarter than I talk, and I learn from them. I also read good books written by the best writers and learn from them too.”

“You see,” replied Domenico, “I could never give such good answer as you just did.”

“Well, don’t exaggerate,” said Giulio, “you can say it in your own way, maybe better than I can. And you can do many things better then I. For example, you sing better then I ever could.” And the brothers laughed and patted each other on the shoulders.

“Now tell me about Uncle Pietro,” asked Giulio. “How did he die?”

”My poor brother, my poor brother,” complained the Mother. He didn’t deserve to die at the hands of the partisans. He never wronged or harmed anybody in his entire life.”

“But he was in the wrong place at the wrong time,” Domenico explained. “As you know, being a custodian of the Fascist Club of Professionals building, he lived there. When the partisans fought the fascists, they did the same to them what the fascists did to the partisans until the last days they were in power.

When the partisans came to the club to search for the fascists, Uncle opened the door and they grabbed him, probably convinced that, if he lived there, he was also a Fascist. At that moment everybody was filled with hatred and revenge for what the fascists did to their comrades,” Domenico justified their action.

“We didn’t know about it right away,” his mother continued the story. “After a few days when he didn’t show up here as usual, I went to the club and found my mother alone. She could not understand why they took her son away. Before this happened, she was already frail, could not walk well and her mind was becoming confused; she depended on Pietro to take care of her. After she was left alone in that big place, she became even more disoriented. All that she was able to tell me was that the men came, searched their apartment and the club, took her son away, and that he never came back.”

After an emotional pause, the Mother continued, “I notified right away my brother Duilio[16] about what happened. So, I, and Verginia[17] with Giuliana[18] and Rita,[19] were taking turns to help my mother. We did what we could to find out what happened to *Zio*[20] Pietro. We went to the prison, the morgue, the cemetery, the hospitals, and the registry office asking if there were any records about my brother, but it was all in vain,” she complained. “The answer was always the same, ‘There are so many people who disappeared in these few weeks. Nobody kept records of who they were and what happened to them.’” Then she prompted Domenico, “Tell him, how you tried to find out something about your uncle from your comrades partisans.”

“What there is to tell?” he said. “It was such confusion in the whole city. It seems that the partisan command was involved with much more important objectives at that time. In the chaos of the last days each partisan unit and even some small groups or individuals were acting independently in their reprisal against the Fascists. They didn’t register their victims, they probably didn’t even know their names.”

“My poor brother,” Mamma complained again. “He, who was so religious, more then any one else in our family, and he couldn’t have a decent Christian burial.”

Giulio got up, embraced his mother and said, “Uncle Pietro was a good person—he didn’t deserve to die in such tragic way.”

For a while all remained silent, immersed in somber thoughts. Then Giulio began to translate for me in French what Domenico and his mother had told him.

Domenico listened with admiration at how his brother was speaking fluently in French. Once in a while he would smile and tell Giulio, “I know why you have learned to speak French so well. Even I can understand many words. They sound like Piedmontaise.”[21]

“True,” said Giulio, “but I had a lot of practice in two years talking with my French coworker in Germany.”

Meanwhile, the Mother was cooking Sunday lunch. She was chopping garlic and parsley on the wooden board placed on the marble top kitchen table. And I was fascinated by how she was using a curved tool to do it. Giulio said, “That tool is called *la mezzaluna*, in Italian it means a half-moon; it is used for *trittare,* in Italian it means to chop.”

Then he used this occasion to teach me some other words. He pointed to the things that were on the table, named them in Italian and then named them in French, “That’s *l’aglio* - the garlic; that’s *il perzemolo* - the parsley; that’s *la salsiccia* - the sausage; those are *i pomodori* - the tomatoes; that’s *il sale* - the salt; and that’s *il pepe* - the pepper; and there’s *il riso* - the rice. From all those ingredients Mamma would make *il sugo di pomodoro* - the tomato sauce, for *il risotto* (and this word he named in Russian) - *kasha* – the porridge made from rice, which she would cook in the tomato sauce. And when *il risotto* will be *cotto* - cooked, we shall *mangiare* - eat. When he finished this sing-song, everybody laughed.

But I took it seriously and pointing to each item repeated the names in Italian.

“Brava!” exclaimed Domenico, “she will learn to speak Italian soon.”

“I know it,” calmly confirmed Giulio and rewarded me by giving me a quick kiss on the cheek.

I looked at him with surprise and whispered in French, “Did you dare to kiss me in your mother’s and brother’s presence?”

“Shush,” he whispered back. “It was on the spur of the moment to reward you for learning your lesson so well.”

“Babbo will be soon home for lunch,” said Mamma. And Giulio got up, put the tablecloth on the table and I got up and helped him to set the table. I observed that Domenico was not used to helping his mother, he was just sitting there and watching, as if it was natural for him to see his brother doing it.

Babbo, as they called their father, came home for lunch and Giulio presented me to him. I embraced him cautiously because he had a service bag across one of his shoulders, newspaper in one hand, and I was trying not to push from his head his streetcar uniform cap that he didn’t remove either entering the room or when he was greeting me. Only when Babbo removed his cap did I see that he was bald on the front of his head, making him look as if he had a very wide forehead, which actually was rather narrow.

“Well, well, well,” he said to Domenico with satisfaction on his face, “now we can brag with our comrades that we have a genuine communist in our home.”

“Not so fast,” replied Domenico. “She is not a communist.”

“Why not?” asked Babbo with disbelief.

“Because not everybody in Russia is a communist,” explained Giulio.

“Look here!” Babbo pushed the newspaper “Unita”[22] into my hands, pointing with his finger to the headline printed in bold letters. “Could you read this? Communists shall

win the Italian elections."

I looked at him, shaking my head because I had no idea what he was trying to tell me about communists. But he understood that I was trying to tell him "No" about their victory and in a raised voice began to explain something that I still couldn't understand.

Giulio promptly calmed him down, "Babbo, I told you last night that Lala doesn't understand and doesn't speak Italian."

"Why then she was shaking her head?" he asked angrily.
"She was showing you that she doesn't understand what you were telling her," Giulio explained calmly.

The Mother changed the subject by inviting us to eat, "Let's sit down for lunch, *il risotto* is ready." Giulio and Domenico pushed the table closer to the couch because there were only four chairs and Giulio decided that he and I would sit there together. I noticed that Mamma was not happy that we sat on the couch, but at that moment she didn't comment.

She placed a pot with the *risotto* in the middle of the table. She served Babbo first and then divided fairly the rest of the hot rice among the four of us. "I am sorry," she said to Giulio, "we don't have Parmesan cheese to put on."

"Mamma, it tastes good without it," he complimented her cooking. "The Italian spices in the sausage give the taste to the sauce. I have not tasted sauce like this for very long time."

"Do you like it?" he asked me.

"*Buono, buono*,"[23] I said in Italian.

Domenico commented, "You are right, brother, she will speak Italian soon."

I was surprised to see that, although there was a scarcity of food, the bottle of red wine was on the table. Giulio poured for me some wine and diluted it with water, as did everybody else, except Babbo who had the full glass without water. Mamma placed two oranges on the table and said, "Giulio, you share one with your wife and I will share it with Domenico." Babbo, instead of eating the fruit, poured for himself another glass of Barbera wine.

As soon as we finished eating Giulio hurried up to help his mother to clear the table while his brother again didn't even try to get up. I wanted to help too, but Giulio said, "Too many helpers now. You may help Mamma to dry the dishes."

After lunch Babbo had to return to work and he checked the time on his big watch that he pulled out of his uniform vest pocket and said, "Ten more minutes and I shall go." Then he opened his newspaper and shared with Giulio and Domenico some political news. He was talking in an authoritative tone that did not allow for any different opinion to be ex¬pressed by his sons. He checked again the time and left saying only "*Ciao*" to all.

As soon as his father left, Domenico got up and said, "I am going out."

His mother warned him, "Come on time for supper; you know that your father likes that we eat on time."

"Mamma, it is Sunday!" replied Domenico in a very annoyed tone of voice. "Please eat without me. I don't know when I would return."

"It is the first day that your brother is at home," she reproached him, "and you don't even care to keep him company!"

He didn't answer her, but just said, "*Ciao*," and quickly disappeared behind the

door.

"You see," she told Giulio, "as soon as he can, he runs to see 'that girl.' Your brother got involved with 'that girl' when she was with him in the partisan group and she visited him in prison."

"I know about her. You told me this yesterday," Giulio said patiently.

"Now they work together at Rabotti.[24] He is never home in the evenings, on Saturdays, and Sundays. 'That girl' bewitched him; if he will go on like this, he would never go back to his wife." She continued to complain to Giulio. "It is a shame, because they have such a beautiful daughter, Silvia. And he doesn't care about her either. On some Sundays I have to force him to go and bring her here."

In the beginning Giulio tolerated with a good grace the complaining of his mother and abstained from making any comments about his brother. Then his patience began to thin out and he replied, "Mamma, he is young, he wants to have some fun."

"To have some fun?!" screamed his mother with indignation. "Rubbish! It's by having fun he became a father and had to marry the sixteen-years-old girl! He is already old enough to take some responsibilities for his actions." And she continued her lamentation for a while. I could not understand the words but figured this out from the tone of her voice.

Finally, Giulio interrupted his mother by asking her, "Do you think that with your preaching and annoying him constantly you could change the situation?"

"But, if I don't talk to him about it," she insisted, "who will put him on the right road?"

"It is his wife who should do something about it, if she wants him back," Giulio responded.

Then Giulio looked at the watch and said, "Mamma, would you excuse us, we better go to the Parish to talk to the priest so we could accomplish something today."

"God gracious! It's already so late. I wanted to get your suit out before you leave," she said and excused herself, "This morning there was so much to do and I completely forgot about it."

"Don't worry, Mamma, I am so used to wearing my uniform that nothing will happen if I wear it one more day," he answered.

"Then you better hurry," she replied, "before the priest goes for lunch."

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1. "Sleepy-head" [in Italian].
2. "Hi!" [in Italian].
3. "Yes, thank you." [in Italian].
4. It was common to call all Soviet citizens as Russians.
5. It was common to call the Soviet Union as Russia.
6. See the chapter: "Chance, Destiny Or the Will of God."
7. See the chapter "Repatriation of the Italian Prisoners of War."
8. See the chapter "Volunteer in the Italian Air Force."
9. A Russianized diminutive for the name Giulio.
10. STIPEL - acronym for *Societa Telefonica Interregionale Piemonte e Lombardia.*[in Italian] - Interregional Telephone Company of Piedmont and Lombardy.
11. Against the fascists and the Germans.
12. As recounted by Domenico Verro, Giulio's younger brother.
13. *Le Nove Prigioni* , shortly called "*Le Nove*" [in Italian] The New Prison.
14. "Mama, that will do!" [in Italian].

15. “The Franchini's Family Tree,” Foglio No. 3; Giulio’s uncle, his mother’s older brother.
16. Ibid, Foglio No. 3; Giulio’s uncle, his mother’s younger brother.
17. Ibid, Foglio No. 8. - The Wife of Giulio’s uncle Duilio.
18. Ibid, Foglio No. 8; Giulio’s cousin, the older daughter of Duilio and Verginia.
19. Ibid, Foglio No. 8; Giulio’s cousin, the younger daughter of Duilio and Verginia.
20. Uncle [in Italian].
21. Piedmontaise dialect is a vernacular used by the natives of the Piedmont, a northwestern province in Italy. This dialect was influenced by the geographical proximity to France and its on-off French domination of the region through the centuries.
22. Official Italian Communist Party newspaper.
23. “Good, good” [in Italian].
24. Factory in Turin, which produced some parts and rewired electrical motors.

Chapter 31

Strict Rules Of the Catholic Church

By Olga Gladky Verro
Also as Remembered by Giulio Verro

The Parish was just a few blocks away from Giulio's parents house, but to get there quicker Giulio took a shortcut through the narrow Via Favria behind their apartment building. When Giulio said its name, I said, "It looks exactly as you described it to me when you recounted about your childhood.[1] That's where your mother allowed you to play as a boy?"

"Yes," Giulio confirmed. "And in so many years it didn't change at all."

When we turned into another small street to the left, Giulio pointed to the plain one-story building, "That's the public washhouse operated by the city. There, for a little money one can wash clothes in huge washtubs with hot and cold water. When my mother has very big items to wash, she comes here. But the regular wash she does at home because it is too heavy to haul the wet stuff back to the fifth floor every week. As a youngster I used to help her to do it. I still remember how heavy it was!"

We found the church open and empty, all the worshippers had already gone home, except for some old women who were praying near the statues of Madonna and some saints. We went to the *Sacrestia,*[2] where the priest was almost ready to leave. Giulio explained to him, "Father, we wanted to get married as soon as possible because we just arrived from Germany and are expecting a baby to be born in about a month."

The priest looked at us benevolently and asked, "Are you both Catholics?"

Giulio answered, "I am. And she was baptized in the Christian Russian Orthodox church."

"My children," answered the priest, "before I could marry you, the young woman must change her faith and become a Catholic. She has to attend catechism lessons with the nuns, pass the exams, and take the Sacraments. Then we have to make the public announcement about marriage and wait for at least two weeks to see if there are any objections to this marriage by anybody. It cannot be done in a hurry."
Giulio translated his answer. I said, "Ask the priest why I have to become a Catholic if both religions are Christian?"

The priest smiled and in a sweet voice said, "My child, because it is the rule of the Catholic Church." He assumed that this explanation was sufficient for me and, if I wanted to get married in his church, I would change my religion without asking other questions. "Go and talk to the nuns." He said, "They will tell you when to come for the lessons."

Giulio translated it and suggested, "Let's talk to the nuns and find out how much time you will need to attend these lessons." I agreed and we went to see the nuns.

One of the nuns approached us and Giulio explained to her what the priest had told us.

"Well," she replied, "the lessons are given only on Saturdays to children whom we prepare for the First Communion; for them it takes many weeks, but you are welcome to come too. We can arrange to have your exams sooner. It will depend on how quickly you would memorize all the prayers and the answers to the questions from the Catechism." She gave me a booklet of prayers so I could start to memorize some of them and told me to come next Saturday at nine o'clock in the morning.

We left, very discouraged by our prospects to get married before the birth of our baby. As we exited the church, Giulio suggested, "Lala, I don't feel like going home right away. Let's walk in the neighborhood and talk. Maybe we could make sense out of what we just heard from the priest and the nun."

"I think it is a good idea of discussing it before making a decision," I said and added, "I am also eager to be alone with you for a while longer."

We walked arm-in-arm at a leisurely pace and reasoned about what we should do with my conversion to the Catholic religion. Finally, Giulio concluded categorically, "It is out of the question, we don't have the time for all this nonsense! We need to register you right away in the City Hall for the residency to receive the food coupons, and we have no choice but to use your temporary passport. I am sure that with this document I could also register you at the STIPEL office as my wife. This will cover us also financially for the family benefits,[3] and for the health insurance,[4] which includes doctor's visits and hospital stay for the childbirth."

Then he reasoned further, "However, if we are not going to be married in church, then we shall get married in the City Hall. We have to get married legally in any way that is quick. Maybe there, we could do it on time to be able to register our baby as being born to the legally married parents."

He thought for a while and came up with an idea, "Tonight I will ask my father if among his acquaintances he knows a lawyer to counsel us on how it could be done quickly, because the regulations about the announcements of marriage and the waiting period should be the same as in the church. But there might be some exceptions to this rule that the lawyers should know."

"Giulio," I said, "then you have to tell your father that we are not legally married."

"Not necessarily," he replied. "I told them that it will take very long time for our certificate of marriage to arrive from Poland and they agreed that we need it before the baby is born."

"But now, that we decided not to go through with the church wedding," I asked, "could this explanation be as convincing for getting married in the City Hall?"

"Why not?" replied Giulio. "This does not change the fact that we need this document as soon as possible. Let's not change this story any more. Do you agree?"

I replied, "I agree."

"Good, then we shall not have any more discussions about it," concluded Giulio as a final statement on this question.

Although I agreed with him, I still wondered, "Why are you afraid to tell your family the truth that the Soviets didn't allow their citizens to get married with the foreigners and that the only way to remain together was to buy the certificate of marriage?"

"My dearest Lala," exclaimed Giulio. "You are a very intelligent girl, but you are so innocently inexperienced in life. You believe that all people are good and that you can always trust them to treat you fairly. The prejudice and habit of judging the others for their transgressions of traditions and rules of conduct existing for centuries are hard to

die, even in my own family. And gossip and malignity are the people's favored pastimes. I have to do what I think is best for your protection."

He pulled me closely to him and explained, "We don't have to tell my parents or anybody else that there is no record of our marriage in Poland. They had to assume that what is written in your temporary passport is true, that we are legally married." He said this with strong emphasis on the word 'legally.'

"This means that you have certain legal rights as my wife and that I, as your husbands, have the legal obligations toward you. And it also means that my parents, relatives, and all the others should respect you and treat you as my wife. In our hearts and minds we know that we made a commitment to each other that we are married. There should not be any doubt about it also in the minds of others. I don't want you or our child to be subjected to any kind of humiliation for this reason, neither now nor in the future."

I was overwhelmed by his thoughtfulness to protect me from the harm that others could cause me. "Oh, my dearest Giulio, how lucky am I to have you by my side. What I would do without you?"

He corrected me, "What we would do without each other? I need your love and devotion as much as you need mine." And he squeezed tight my arm and hand to make me feel our togetherness.

We walked for a while in silence, reflecting on the decision that we just made. Then Giulio said, "You know Lala, from the time we arrived here last evening, except for a few brief moments, this is the first time that we are alone." And he candidly confessed, "Last night and this morning I missed the happy mo¬ments of being close to you and to express freely our affection as we used to do from the time we have been together."

I replied, "Giulyenka, I missed you too."

"It is so strange," he pondered, "but I don't feel at ease to hug you and to kiss you in the presence of my mother, as I did when we lived with your mother."

I concurred with his perception, "I felt this right away as we arrived and you presented me to your mother. It was like you were afraid to reveal to her your true feelings for me."

"I think it's because I never saw my mother and my father express their affection for each other in the presence of Domenico and me, like it was not a proper thing to do."

He squeezed my hand again, as if this was helping him to reassure me, "Soon we shall find our own place to live where we shall be free to behave as we were used to."

I wished, "I hope that it would be very, very soon."

He squeezed my hand again several times as if he was reinforcing his promise, "My dearest Lala, I promise you that I will try really hard to find it as soon as possible."

We were walking arm-in-arm as we used to do in Laband. We didn't pay any attention to the strangers who were passing by, as probably they did the same. I felt Giulio's arm holding tight my arm close to his body, the warmth of his hand and the pres¬sure of his fingers intertwined with mine made me feel secure that nothing and nobody could change our need of each other.

We were distracted from our thoughts by a large and very nicely decorated display of women's clothing in a shop window. I looked with curiosity on the styles of the winter dresses and coats. "The hems are still very short," I remarked.

"Fabrics are expensive," commented Giulio, "if they want to sell them they should

use less material."

"It is good for me," I made practical conclusion. "I could use all my dresses and coats if they would fit me after the baby is born."

As we walked further, Giulio said, "I will show you a part of this neighborhood where I grew up; where as a child I played and went to school; where as a youngs¬ter I ran the errands for my mother in the small shops to buy milk, bread or wine; and where on some Sunday afternoons I went to the second-rate movie theaters. This part of the city is called Barriera Di Milano."[5]

"I am curious to see the places that are dear to you," I said. "It is the part of you that I know very little about."

We went along several blocks of the wide Corso Giulio Cesare where the newer multi-story apartment buildings had some style in architecture and many had the whole front of the building proudly showing off ornate individual balconies and the shops were all smaller in size and most of the merchants didn't bother to display their merchandise even if they had modest display windows. Giulio showed me the many shops that his mother patronized: beef-meat butcher, horse-meat butcher, delicatessen, dairy shop, bakery, wine shop, pastry shop, and tobacco shop. Some of them were on the ground floor in the apartment buildings after Palermo Movie Theater, some in the same building where his family lived, or opposite it on the other side of the street.

When we reached the corner of Corso Palermo and turned right, I recognized that it was the apartment building on Corso Novara, 25. I could see now that on the corner there was a barber shop, beauty parlor, and a grocery shop before the main entrance door, and on the other side of the door there was a man's hat shop. Further on, all the way to the corner of Via Favria, was some kind of a workshop.

"Well," said Giulio, "now you have acquainted yourself with the working class neighborhood where I grew up. It is a modest place, but it has everything that the family needs. Tomorrow you shall go with Mamma to the open market that is not far from here on the market square where Corso Novara and Corso Giulio Cesare are crossing. She goes there every morning to buy fresh vegetables and fruits for the day. Then she buys bread, meat, wine, and other products in the shops on Corso Palermo and some things she buys in this grocery shop of Signor Prato in our building, although she doesn't like his shop because he keeps everything more expensive then his competitors."

With Giulio's help I slowly made the four flights of stairs to the fifth floor and had to rest several times to catch my breath. Giulio joked, "Be patient, Lala, these are the last weeks that you have to carry our baby on the stairs, after I will be carrying him."

"Or her," I corrected him.

"Of course, I am just teasing you."

"Ciao, Mamma," we said entering the kitchen.

"We made a big circle walking in our neighborhood," Giulio explained to justify our long absence.

"Have you made a date with the priest for your wedding?"

"Well, Mamma, we would not be able to get married in church before the baby is born," Giulio replied with resignation.

Surprised with such answer she asked, "Why not?"

He explained that we needed more time to satisfy the rules of the Catholic church.

“Those darned priests,” she reacted with disdain, “they have always something new to invent!”

Giulio replied calmly, “Well, we will try to do it in the City Hall.”

I paid attention that this change of place didn’t cause her to ask any questions, and I thought, “Giulio was right, they believe that we are already married and that we need to do it again here to have our document sooner.”

He explained to his mother, “As for tomorrow, I think that Lala’s temporary passport probably will be a valid document to register her in all offices.”

That evening Domenico didn’t come home for supper and we waited only for Babbo to eat our evening meal. While Giulio and I were away, Mamma prepared for the supper Giulio’s favored chicory salad and she fried potatoes just before we sat at the table.

“It tastes so good,” he said to his mother. “The closest to it that I could find in Poland, were the young and tender dandelion leaves, which we collected with Lala in the spring.”

He asked me in French, “Do you like it?”

“Yes, but I find it more bitter then dandelions,” I said, “but, it is tastier with lots of garlic and a little of olive oil and vinegar dressing.”

His mother was curious about what I said and he translated it to her. I saw that it was bothering her when Giulio was talking with me in French, because she couldn’t understand it.

This time after we finished eating, I got up before Giulio
to help Mamma to clear the table and to dry the dishes while Giulio remained to talk with Babbo. Babbo exploded in indignation when he heard about our visit to the Parish and priest’s request that I convert to Catholic faith; and especially about the time needed to attend Catechism lessons given by the nuns only on Saturdays. He had very strong anti-clergy convictions and made a long monologue on that subject.

Giulio and his mother listened patiently, because they knew that when he was in that mood, he could not be interrupted or contradicted without being upset. And I couldn’t understand what he was saying in Italian.

Finally, Babbo exhausted his repertoire of anti-church and anti-clergy words and phrases and Giulio got the opportunity to tell him, “There is only one other place to have the certificate of marriage sooner, it is to get married in the City Hall.” And he asked him, “By any chance, maybe you know some honest lawyer who could advise us on how to expedite this procedure?”

Babbo scratched his bald spot on the head and gave him a positive answer, “On Monday I would talk about this with our company’s lawyer. I heard that he had given help to some of my co-workers when they needed legal advice. Giulio right away translated it to me in French and added with the proverb, “When one door closes, God opens another one.”

Then he and his father began talking about the political events that happened in Italy during the last two-and-half years when Giulio was a prisoner of war in Germany and had no news from home. At some point in their conversation, Babbo pulled out of his billfold a brand new Communist Party membership card and proudly showed it to Giulio.

“I always thought that you were a socialist,” remarked Giulio. “Why have you changed the party?”

"Socialist party is too soft," Babbo answered in an authoritative manner and added with the slogan that probably he heard at some party rally, "The future of the Italian people belongs to the Communist Party." He looked proudly at Giulio, as if he wanted to impress him that he really believed in the communism and knew what he was talking about.

Then, with the tone of wisdom, he gave him a long lecture, "It is very important, especially now that the Party Chairman is the long time Communist Party leader, Comrade Togliatti.[6] Under his leadership we shall win these elections. Do you know that he lived in exile in the Soviet Union and learned their system
first hand? When Communist Party comes to power, we—he said 'we' giving it big importance and pointing to himself, like he was included in that 'we'—shall give freedom, justice, and rights to the people of this country."

Giulio listened very patiently to his father's ideas and finally asked him, "How do you know that the Soviet system is better then the one we had under Mussolini?"

Babbo raised his voice as if he was shocked that his son could doubt his wisdom and asked, "What kind of asinine question is that?! The answers are easy to find, all you should do is to read the Communist newspaper '*Unita*' and go to the Communist Party meetings and rallies!"

"Well," answered Giulio disregarding his father's intolerance to being contradicted, "I heard first hand about the Communist system from the Russians who fled from Soviet Union. And it is a different story..."

His father didn't allow him to finish his sentence and promptly replied with absolute conviction, "Those are the tales of the White Russians[7] who fought against the revolution and against the Communists; they are afraid of being found out that they are counter-revolutionaries and be punished for it. Otherwise, why would they run away from their own country?" He looked proudly at Giulio convinced that he was politically more educated then his son.

Giulio couldn't resist showing his father that he was a patsy of the Communist propaganda and began to ask him question, "Babbo, you mean that if the Communists would win the elections and shall come to power in Italy, they would punish all those who..."

"Listen, Giulio," Mother cautiously interrupted him when she detected the warning signs that her husband was becoming contentious, "it's time for your father to go to bed. He has to work tomorrow and needs to get up very early in the morning."

Babbo pulled out his pocket watch and said, "We talked too long. It's late, I better go to sleep."

"Giulio," Mother prompted, "get the couch's linen out of the wardrobe in the bedroom, so you will not disturb your father later."

After Giulio came back with the linen, he talked about something with his mother. I saw her giving him a clean towel and after wishing us good night she followed her husband to the bedroom.

Giulio told me, "On Sunday nights Domenico comes home late. I asked Mamma if you could use this time to wash yourself, because you need to freshen up after the trip. She always keeps the water warm in that big water-basin built in on the back of the stove." He pulled out from under the sink a medium size round metal basin and placed it on the floor. "Do the best you can in this. I washed myself already last night." He opened

the oven door to keep me warm and poured hot water in the basin and I added cold tap water with a small pot. After I washed myself the best I could, Giulio washed my back, warmed up a towel near the oven, and while I was drying myself, he poured the water from the basin in the sink and mopped the wet floor.

When Giulio finished cleaning up, I had already put on my nightgown. He kissed gently my neck and said, “Now you are clean as a little angel. You smell heavenly of soap and water. Come over here on the couch and sit next to me. I want to feel you close to me for a while before my brother arrives.” But the expectation that Domenico could come home at any moment and a suspicion that his parents could hear us in the other room, kept us restrained in expressing our affection.

“What is happening to us?” he asked. “I don’t feel at ease even in kissing and caressing you, as if I am afraid of being caught in the act of doing something wrong.”

“I also feel very uncomfortable.” I said. “Maybe I better go to share the bed with my new companions.”

With disappointment in his voice Giulio replied, “We need to find soon some solution to these awkward sleeping arrangements.” He got up and said, “Stay here and watch me preparing a sleeping place for Domenico and me.”

He moved the kitchen table a little farther from the couch, placed the four chairs next to it with the backs toward the table. Then he placed the couch cushions on the chairs and covered it all with a bed sheet, neatly tucking it under the cushions to hold them together. He placed each pillow on the opposite ends and explained, “This way there is more room to spread our arms.” On top he placed another bed sheet and a blanket. “That’s how the two of us used to sleep when we were growing up and when we were grown-up. I always slept on the side of the chairs and cushions where it is bumpy and less comfortable.”

I commented, “Now I am just beginning to learn how you lived in your family.”

We heard the steps on the balcony and Giulio said, “That’s Domenico. Quick, give me a good night kiss and go to the bedroom before I will open the door.” I sneaked into the bedroom and cautiously crawled on the very edge of the bed, although there was plenty of room from the middle of it where Giulio’s mother was sleeping. That night it took me a long time to fall asleep, I missed terribly to have Giulio cuddled next to me and I knew that he was missing me too.

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1. See the chapter “Giulio Is Growing Up”.
2. Sacristy, vestry.
3. *Assegni Familiari [in Italian]* - Family Allowances in addition to the worker’s wages.
4. *Mutua [in Italian]* - Health Insurance Association.
5. The borough of the city of Turin that got its name from the ancient Customs Station - *Barriera di Milano*.
6. Palmiro Togliatti, Chairman of the Italian Communist Party after World War II.
7. Belonging to the White Army who fought against the Red revolutionaries in the Civil war, 1919-1921.

Chapter 32

Busy Monday For Giulio

By Olga Gladky Verro
Also as Remembered by Giulio Verro

Monday, after the good morning kiss by Giulio, the routine was the same as the day before. However, I was somewhat less conscious of being observed because Domenico and Babbo had already gone to work and Mamma was ironing Giulio's shirt. She had already pulled one of Giulio's suits out of a wardrobe and hung it on the clothesline off the balcony to remove naphthalene smell. Giulio was collecting all the documents that he needed for the registrations in all the offices today.

"You better go earlier," suggested his mother, "before they open the doors in the City Hall. There are always long lines and sometimes one has to wait many hours. And if you don't come to the office window before their lunch time, you have to wait two extra hours before the employees return to the office."

She asked Giulio to take the suit from outside and she pressed out wrinkles that formed during Giulio's long absence from home.

When Giulio came out of the bedroom all dressed up in a white and blue check pattern wool suit, blue shirt and a blue-striped white silk necktie, he was so elegant-looking that I could not believe that it was my Giulio whom I used to see dressed in his air force uniform, or in the second-hand suit he purchased at the market at Katowice.

"It fits me to perfection," he said turning around to show the back of the suit.

"I don't recognize you," I commented, "you are not an aviator any more, you are a gentleman."

"You have to get used to my new appearance," he advised me. "I have several suits that were made after I returned from Spain. The uniform has served its purpose. Now I am a civilian, or I will be as soon as I get a discharge from the Air Force today.

Meanwhile, his mother was giving the last pressing touches to his raincoat. She even helped him to put it on. Before leaving Giulio gave a kiss on his mother's cheek and said, "Thank you, Mamma, for pressing my clothes." And then he came to me and kissed me also on the cheek. At that moment I felt as if I were being pushed out of importance in his life by his mother's caring for and pampering him. I felt as if I were only a spectator observing her ritual of obsessive mothering.

That morning I helped the Mother in the bedroom to make the big bed, the task that I learned to do the day before. But this time she showed me that I should not walk around the bed, but to step on the quilted pads made from several layers of recycled old wool cloth and to slide on the floor.

Then she showed me how to dust and to polish the waxed ceramic tile floor with those pads. It was so simple. With both feet on the pads she was sliding in a circular motion slowly moving in the passageway and pushing it under the furniture as far as her foot would reach. When the pad collected enough dust she would shake off the pads out the open window; the dust puffs would fly away, picked up by the air currents that

were quite strong at the height of the fifth floor. She left me to finish polishing the floor while she was dusting the furniture. I think that she was satisfied that I was a fast learner.

When we finished with the bedroom routine, Mamma took her coat and showed me that I should do the same. She took a large canvas market bag and I understood that we were going to the market. It was a couple of city blocks away on the square where Corso Novara and Corso Giulio Cesare were crossing. It was an open market with the tables placed in rows; some were with canvas roofs and sides for protection from wind and rain.

There were mostly merchant vendors reselling at retail price the produce they were buying on the wholesale market. There was also a section were the small farmers were selling their produce, but they didn't have tables and displayed their produce in the baskets and boxes placed on the ground.

Compared to the market in Katowitz, there was much greater variety of fruits and vegetables, some of which were not known to me. Besides fresh produce there were also vendors who had some other non rationed food products, such as fish, cheese, and legumes; and there were a few vendors selling some household items.

I observed that Mamma had her preferred vendors whom she knew and who saluted her as an old customer. She bought several kinds of vegetables: potatoes, carrots, celery, onions, leeks, cabbage, and endive, and a piece of pumpkin. She said that it was for *minestrone,* as it is called Italian vegetable soup that Giulio liked very much. She also bought some apples.

On our way home we stopped on Corso Palermo at the bakery and she bought, with the bread coupons, white buns. I saw that with the baker she didn't have such a good rapport as she had with the vendors on the market. She was arguing with the baker because, as I understood, he was giving her buns with pallid crust and she was demanding he exchange them for more toasted ones and the baker was reluctant to do that. She exited the bakery complaining about the baker's arrogance with customers.

Before going to the market Mamma had placed on the stove a big pot to boil dry beans. As soon as we returned, she began to clean vegetables and gave me potatoes to peel and wash and she added them to the boiling beans. Then I helped her to scrape the carrots while she chopped on the wooden board with *mezzaluna* the onions, leeks, celery, carrots, and the well washed in several waters endive. She sautéed with olive oil in a big sauce pan all chopped vegetables and then, a few minutes before pouring it all in the boiling pot, added to it canned tomato paste. The last one to be added was the cabbage, cut coarsely with a knife.

That morning I learned the names of vegetables and a few action verbs as Mamma was telling and showing me what to do as I helped her to prepare the soup. *Minestrone* was ready before Babbo came home for lunch. I had set the table and, because Mamma decided that Giulio would not come home on time since he had to go in too many places, the three of us had our meal together.

I understood that Babbo asked his wife if I helped her and she gave a positive answer. Babbo's routine after lunch was the same as yesterday, reading the communist newspaper "Unita" before returning to work. He exchanged some news with his wife and pointed again to me some headlines. This time, I smiled and nodded, like I approved of what was written there. He liked that.

I helped Mamma to clear the table, but she didn't wash the dishes right away. Instead, after Babbo left for work, she placed the chair on one side of the couch, put the arm cushion on the high side panel

and rested her head on her folded arms; she invited me to rest in similar way on the other side panel. I was surprised that she didn't sit on the couch and therefore I didn't dare to sit on it either. Besides, I remembered that Giulio told me that it was not allowed in their home to sit on the couch; they only slept on it at night.[1]

Therefore, I sat on the chair near the table and tried to read the newspaper left by Babbo. I found out that it was much simpler to read Italian then French and that my knowledge of French helped me to understand many words that had the same Latin origins and I could make some sense of what I was reading.

Mamma rested for about half-an-hour and then began to wash the dishes while I helped her by drying them. As she was putting the dishes in the small niche in the wall that was adapted for storage, she gave me a broom and I swept the ceramic tile floor in the kitchen. She showed me how to collect the sweepings in the dustpan and to bring it outside to the balcony where there was a small garbage chute located next to the latrine door.

Then she took the mop holder with the long handle and the mopping cloth, filled the pail with water, added some cleaning powder, and meticulously mopped and dried the kitchen floor, ending at the door to the balcony. We both had to get out and wait on the balcony to let the floor dry completely so there would be no footmarks left when we reentered. Meanwhile she rinsed the floor in the latrine by splashing it with the water from the pail.

When we entered the kitchen she said with relief, "Now I can sit and read the newspaper." I understood it only because I saw her taking it and sitting at the table to read.

I went to the bedroom and brought out our second suitcase that was filled with the baby layette, diapers, and blankets that I prepared for the baby from the recycled items that we found in abundance in our neighbors apartment.[2] I placed the suitcase on the table, opened it and began proudly to show her the little shirts, sheets, blankets, and diapers, which I had carefully hemmed with the blanket stitch or crocheted on the edges with colored yarns. All sheets and diapers I had made from the bed linen; fine undershirts, caps and pillowcases for a little pillow, from the hand-made lingerie in fine batiste that was decorated with lace; the flannel shirts and light blankets, from some garments found in the same place. My aunt had given me several knitted sweaters and many other baby clothes when her little son Igor outgrew them.

Giulio's mother was impressed that I made so many clothes for the baby. She inspected very carefully the baby-shirts with the hand-made French and welt seams, the lace, and entre-deux work. She was very curious, if I made it myself. I explained to her, mostly by showing with my hands, what I made and what was already decorated on the women's lingerie that I recycled. I couldn't tell for sure how much she understood from my explanation, but I felt that she appreciated the fine workmanship. She remarked, however, that I had only two pairs of booties and she promised to knit a few more pairs.

Giulio came home in the middle of afternoon. He was in a good mood and cheerfully said, "While I am telling you about my accomplishments, you, Lala, put on your good dress and arrange your hair. We have to go to the photographer; we need the pictures for identity cards and for my STIPEL ID card."

His mother said, "You didn't have any thing to eat from this morning. I made *minestrone;* it is still warm. While she gets ready, you sit down and eat. I bet you didn't taste anything like this from the time you left home." I heard from the bedroom how

Giulio was complimenting his mother for her cooking.

I quickly got ready and returned to the kitchen when Giulio was telling to his mother, “You were right, there were very long lines everywhere, but I was able to complete everything that I needed to do.” With obvious satisfaction on his face, he pulled out his and my food coupons and gave them to his mother saying, “Here, they are all yours. You don’t have to worry any more about feeding us.”

She said with relief, “Bravo, this will make my task of getting the food on the table little bit easier, especially there will be enough bread for everybody.”

“Your temporary passport,” he said to me, was accepted everywhere without any questions as a document identifying you as my wife. They registered you as a resident and this qualified you right away for the food coupons.”

And then talking to both of us he announced, “But I have more good news. I received an unlimited discharge from the military service and they told me to return in one week to the Air Force Gathering Post[3] to receive a two months allowance to which I am entitled for the war duty.”[4] All excited, he asked us, “Could you guess how much I will receive?” We both had no idea and didn’t even dare to guess. Giulio proudly announced, “It would amount to more than four thousand liras!”

When his mother heard that Giulio was receiving that much money a big smile illuminated her face and she exclaimed joyfully, “Thank God!”

But Giulio corrected her promptly, “Thank to Mussolini!”

And I thought, “Who could blame her for being happy for her son who came home without one cent in his pocket? This morning on the market I saw the food prices were high and she is justifiably concerned with having to feed two more mouths.”

“And this is not all!” Added Giulio with a touch of suspense, in Italian and in French,

Mamma and I looked at him with an anticipation of big news.

“I kept the best news to tell you the last,” he announced. “I will start my work at the STIPEL only on November first. But, listen to this, when they registered me in the office and I told them that I got married this year, the employee informed me that I was entitled to two weeks marriage leave with gratuity. Therefore, beginning from today STIPEL gave me two weeks of the paid marriage leave, which the company had to give according to the Fascist Law[5] to all employees when they marry.” He looked at his mother and jokingly repeated, “Thanks to Mussolini! Starting from this morning I am already receiving my daily wages.”

Then he said to me in French, “I have also received the two health insurance cards, for me and for you. And we may use them immediately. I have a list of doctors who accept it. We have to make an appointment right away for you to check when the baby is due. As I expected, the insurance would also pay for the hospital care for the childbirth.” Giulio put his arms around my shoulders and said reassuringly, “Dear Lala, now you know that your husband will be able to provide for you and for our child.”

I answered, “Most of all, I am glad that now we shall not be a financial burden to your parents and could afford to live independently as soon as we find an apartment.”

His mother wanted to know what we said to each other and Giulio translated it to her.

When she heard my answer to Giulio, she rather harshly asked Giulio, “She doesn’t like to live with us? Why she wants to have your own apartment?”

“Mamma,” he replied in a reconciliatory manner, “this apartment is too small,

especially now that with the baby there will be six of us living here."

"We can find a bigger apartment," she said promptly as if she had already thought about the solution to this problem and she explained, "With the three men working, we could afford to pay a higher rent and find a better apartment with one extra bedroom for you."

"Mamma," Giulio said very gently, "without meaning to reproach you, I would say that you are returning to your old dream of moving to a better apartment. You know that Babbo never wanted even to hear about it."

"But now, with both, Domenico and you, living with us, it is completely different situation," she defended her idea and explained her plan. "I could slowly persuade your father and convince him to change his mind. Of course, we need to be patient, because it would take some time for me to do it."

Giulio shook his head in a sign of disapproval, but he did not argue with her any more. He just said, "Mamma, we need to hurry to make the photos. There is plenty of time to discuss it later." And he said to me, "Say 'Ciao' to Mamma and let's go!"

On our way to the streetcar stop I told Giulio that I could not understand why he was arguing with his mother. Giulio explained what his mother was arguing about. "She thought that you don't like to live with the family and she didn't like that you expressed a desire of having our own apartment."

I asked him, "Didn't you tell her that both of us want and need to have a place of our own?"

"It was not the right time to tell her about it. If I had told her that, she would have become even more upset by confirming her belief that you and I don't like to live with them. One needs to be a little bit diplomatic. I know that Babbo would never agree to change to the more expensive apartment. Let him, and not us, to disillusion her from her old dream."

"In my family," I replied promptly, "we were used to telling our opinions and ideas to each other and to discussing the ideas about what we shall do without being offended that the others thought differently."

Giulio looked at me and said very calmly, "Dear Lala, if you want to live in peace in my family, you have to learn to understand their characters and to treat them accordingly. I had watched several times my mother, as she listens with a suspicion to our talking in French, because she does not understand it."

"How complicated is the life in your family," I replied. "It will be hard for me to be always on guard, guessing the mood and the thoughts of your parents, to anticipate their reaction to what I am telling before I say something that could upset them."

"You can try," he said, "you just may succeed."

We took the streetcar and I asked Giulio, "Where did you get the money for the tickets?"

"I borrowed yesterday some money from Domenico, I didn't want to ask it from my mother."

We arrived at the business area of the city and walked to Piazza Castello, where Giulio knew the photo-studio of Colombo.[1] Giulio asked to make our photos for the ID Cards and the photographer quickly clicked his camera without bothering and fussing with our posing for it. He told Giulio that the photos would be ready the next day.

In no time, we were outside and Giulio showed me the Old Castle Square with the

ancient Royal Castle and the old classical style buildings. Giulio didn't want to go too far from the streetcar stop, because it was the busy time of the day when the people were beginning to return from work and he didn't want me to travel when the streetcars would be full to capacity.

We arrived home before Domenico and Babbo returned from work. While Giulio and I were setting the table he talked with his mother. "Well, Mamma," he asked, "how did you got along with Lala today? Did she help you to do your daily chores?"

"Yes, she did, but I had to show her everything, because she doesn't understand if I only tell her what she should do."

"Then you should show and tell her at the same time and she will learn the words. The next time when you tell her, she would understand what you want her to do. Please, Mamma, be patient with her. I promise you, she will learn fast." Then he looked at me and asked, "What new Italian words have you learned today?"

I recited all the names of the things, vegetables, and commands that I remem¬bered. "You see," he said to his mother, "she remembers them all."

"I guess, maybe she will learn," she said as if she was not convinced in my ability to learn so quickly.

"What are you planning to do tomorrow?" she asked Giulio and without waiting for his answer made her suggestions, "If you are free in the afternoon, you should come with me to visit your grandmother and to introduce to her your wife. Also we should go to visit your uncle Duilio and his family, and then all of your cousins. Remember that when we go to visit all your relatives you have to find out who wants to be *la Madrina*[6] and *il Padrino*[7] for your child.

"We have to visit all of them in the afternoon, because all men are working in the first shift and return from work at that time. We probably shall go first to see your uncle Duilio, who is always home, because he repairs the shoes, as he did before, in their kitchen.

"Then we shall go to see your cousins who live close to us at the Barriera di Milano. We may start with Derna[8] and Oberto,[9] or maybe with Dina[10] and Enrico.[11] But your cousin Mario,[12] who lives too far, we have to visit on Sunday."

When Giulio translated to me his mother's instructions I was surprised that all the time she was using the word "we." "We shall go." It meant that she was coming with Giulio—she was not telling, "You and Lala should go." But Giulio didn't pay any attention to this, as if it were a normal thing to always have his mother with him when visiting his cousins.

He just replied to her, "I could tell you about what I will do tomorrow when Babbo comes home this evening. All will depend on what he was able to find out for me about his company's lawyer, if he was able to arrange for me to see him and when it shall be." Then he added with satisfaction, "Luckily, I accomplished so much today that I have now plenty of time to occupy myself with all that needs to be done to register our marriage in the City Hall." And he translated it all to me.

"That unexpected marriage leave shall serve its right purpose," I commented.

That evening before Giulio and I began to set the table his mother warned him, "Giulio, I didn't want to tell you this before, but you forgot that we don't use the couch to sit on it, it is your bed. When we are all sitting at the table you should sit on the small chair that I use with the sewing machine."

Giulio was a very obedient son and after that during the meals he sat on that uncomfortable low chair. I remembered that Giulio told me about this strict rule in their family and I thought, "That's why that

couch has been so well preserved for such a long time, from Giulio's childhood until now that he is twenty-nine-years old."

When Babbo came home from work, he had very good news for Giulio, "The lawyer said that he could see you after lunch on Wednesday, October 17, in his office at the Municipal Streetcar Company. You should bring all the documents that you have, no matter in what foreign language they are written, especially your wife's temporary passport and hers and yours birth certificates."

Giulio translated right away this news to me and added, "We shall know soon what we should do next."

While the five of us ate the evening meal, Giulio shared with his father and brother what he had accomplished during the day. Domenico was impressed that his brother was able to accomplish so much in one day. Babbo welcomed the news about the unexpected money Giulio would receive. In the tone of voice and with facial expression of a wise man, he said, "Do you remember, Giulio, when I told you, if you want to have a job security and a steady income, you should find an employment with the public service company? Didn't I give you a good advice? Now, that you have the responsibility as a breadwinner for your family, you will be always able to put bread on the table."

"Yes," answered Giulio, "I remember. But I also should be thankful to Signor Bargero,[13] who recommended me for this good job at the STIPEL."

The Mother quickly suggested, "You should go and visit Signor Bargero. He respected you very much. You never know if you may need his help sometime in the future."

"I would like to see him," said Giulio, "he is a very nice person. I think that he will be interested to hear about my adventures during these two and one-half years. I remember how he was interested when I returned from Spain."

That evening after supper Domenico didn't go out. Babbo brought up again his preferred subject of discussion about politics. With the air of a man informed in this field he was repeating what he read in the official Communist newspaper "*Unita*," or what he heard at the party meetings and rallies, or from his comrades, about the promises of the Communist Party to the Italian people and about importance of the upcoming general elections.

I had already begun to learn some of the Italian words that he used, although the meanings of the discussion were still hard for me to follow. Some of the words I only had to learn the Italian pronunciation, because they were the familiar internationally common words that Babbo used, such as, "the communists" was pronounced "*communisti*", "the party" - "*il partito*", "the elections" - "*le elezioni*", "we shall win" - "*noi vinceremo*", "the Christian Democrats" - "*la Democrazia Christiana*", "the socialists" - "*i socialisti*", "the government" - "*il governo*". My knowledge of French made learning Italian very easy.

And in the context of conversation I could even guess the meanings of the discussion, because Babbo and the Communist Party were always right. Domenico was also supporting his father's side. Therefore, Giulio had no chance to voice his opinion, except when it directly referred to the Soviet system and then he attempted to explain some of its faults and shortcomings. But Giulio's opinion was always contradicted by Babbo, who in an authoritative way was shutting him off.

When Mamma finished washing dishes, I dried them and placed them in their place. Then she put on the table a small box with sewing tools and notions, threads, yarns, and a bag with a bunch of men's socks that needed to be mended. She handed me one sock and, before giving me the other, she slipped in it a wooden egg and asked, "Do you know how to mend?" I have repeated in Italian *rammendare* and nodded to confirm that I understood what she wanted me to do.

She watched me closely as I took the needle, threaded it with yarn and began to mend. I thought, "She wants to check if I am doing it right." I did everything with confidence because in my family we also mended socks and cotton stockings by weaving over the holes with yarn until there was more mending than the original knit. I saw that she was satisfied with my work. Giulio observed his mother and me and when our eyes met, he approvingly nodded and smiled.

The whole evening all five of us sat around the table on the chairs and nobody attempted to sit on the couch, not even Babbo, who was obviously tired after stand¬ing all day on his feet in the streetcar selling the tickets.

Babbo was the first one to retire and Giulio took from the bedroom the linen for their couch. Domenico helped him to make their sleeping place. Mamma followed her husband in the bedroom. I saw that Domenico began to undress and I quickly said, "Good night," and walked toward the bedroom door.

Domenico promptly exclaimed, "No! No! No! You don't have to go." And he explained, "I have to get up early tomorrow morning, but you don't."

I remained standing near the door facing away from Domenico until he finished undressing. He slipped quickly under the blanket and said, "You may look now, I will turn my face toward the wall and will not bother you. And you aren't bothering me." He covered his head with the blanket and then made a quick peack-a-boo saying, "I forgot to say good night!" Giulio and I answered cheerfully, "Good night Domenico!"

Giulio took one page of the newspaper, folded it twice and fastened it with a clothespin on the electric cord above the light bulb forming a half-shade toward the couch. Then he sat on the only remaining chair, the small low chair from the sewing machine, and said in a just-audible voice, "Come here and sit on my lap."

"Would it hold both of us?" I murmured back.

He put his arm around my rather wide waist and whispered in my ear, "The two of you are rather heavy, but we will try."

I placed one arm around his shoulders and with the other arm leaned on the table and asked him gently, "How about this way? Is it little bit easier on your knees?"

"It's perfect," he replied.

Sotto voce we shared our thoughts about the events of these two days and made plans for a few days ahead. But we could only dream about a place of our own.

Giulio consoled me, "My dearest, the most difficult times are all behind us. Think only how many obstacles we have overcome and how long it did take us to arrive safely to Italy. Now we have only to have patience to wait for our dream of having our own place. It might be somewhat uncomfortable to live here with my parents and my brother, but we have a roof over our head, a warm place to stay, the food to eat, and a place to sleep." And he added with regret, "Although not together!"

I gave him a gentle kiss and said, "As long as we love each other we shall have patience to wait."

However, our sitting accommodations were becoming not as comfortable as we first felt and I got up saying, "Your poor knees! It is too much for you to hold for long the

two of us, baby and me. We better go to sleep."

Giulio accompanied me to the bedroom door; we hugged each other and gave a good night kiss.

"I will miss you in bed," he whispered.

"I will miss you too," I replied and sneaked quietly in the bedroom.

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1. See the chapter "Giulio Is Growing Up."
2. See the chapter "Chance, Destiny, or the Will of God."
3. *Regia Aeronautica, "Foglio Di Congedo Illimitato," Torino, 12 Decembre, 1945* [in Italian], [Royal Air Force, "Order of Indefinite Discharge," Turin, December 12, 1945]. Private collection of Olga Gladky Verro.
4. Ibid; p.2; October 22, 1945; Advance: 500 liras; for all months of war duty: 3,536 liras.
5. This law was introduced by the Fascist Regime to encourage young people to marry.
6. The Godmother [in Italian].
7. The Godfather [in Italian].
8. "The Franchini's Family Tree," Foglios No. 4 and No. 4 bis - Derna Guidi Cortopassi.
9. Ibid, Foglio No. 1 - Uberto Cortopassi.
10. Ibid, Foglios No. 2 and No. 4 - Dina Cervelli Macchi.
11. Ibid, Foglio No. 4 - Enrico Macchi.
12. Ibid, Foglios No. 1 and No. 6 - Mario Cortopassi.
13. See the chapter "Giulio Is Growing Up". Also, from a Contract of teaching employment of *Sig.* Bargero as the instructor of the Practical Assembly of the Radio Apparatus in the evening preparatory Courses of Specialization of Radio-Telegraphers for the Italian Armed Forces, 1934, [a gift from private collection of Elsa Bargero Rivelli, daughter of *Sig.* E. Bargero, 2001].

Chapter 23

Giulio’s Grandmother and Uncle Duilio

By Olga Gladky Verro
Also as Remembered by Giulio Verro

Tuesday morning began with what now became a routine for me. But Giulio wanted to leave early to get the photographs that we needed to apply for our ID Cards in the City Hall. So I only helped Mamma with the bedroom chores. Before we left, his mother told Giulio, “This afternoon we all shall go to visit your grandmother and introduce your wife.” Giulio agreed and promised that we would try to be back for lunch.

First we went to pick up our photos, which didn’t come out very good. Giulio’s hair was bunched up on one side and one ear was sticking out; I had my mouth half-open.[1] But we needed the photos right away and Giulio decided not to retake them. We walked to the City Hall and had to stay for long time in line for our ID Cards. However, we arrived home in time to help Mamma set the table before Babbo arrived for lunch, when Giulio gave him a report of what he had done that morning.

As soon as Babbo left, both Giulio and I helped Mamma with the dishes. I was surprised that even when we were in a hurry the whole after lunch routine had to be completed, and Giulio had to sweep and mop the floor. When Giulio finished, he said, “It’s as I used to help before.”

The only thing that Mamma didn’t do before we left was to have her after lunch nap.

To get to Giulio’s grandmother[2] we had to take a streetcar. She was home alone. The three of us greeted her at the door, “*Ciao*, Mamma!” “*Ciao*, *Nonna*!”[3] She mumbled something and proceeded to the kitchen.

“Look who is here, Mamma,” said Giulio’s mother, “Giulio returned home.”

Giulio embraced his grandmother, kissed her on the cheek and said again, “*Ciao*, *Nonna*. How are you?”

“Oh, Giulio... Oh, Giulio...” repeated the Grandmother, as if she could not find other words.

“*Nonna*,” he said placing me in front of her, “this is my wife Lala.” The old woman stared at me, like she wanted to remember if she had seen me before.

Giulio’s mother said to him, “She probably expected to see your fiancée.” Then said to his grandmother, “No, Mamma, this is not Elsa. Giulio has married someone else.”

I wanted to embrace her, but she, without saying anything, moved away from me as from a stranger.

“She is also hard of hearing,” his mother explained. “And from the time Uncle Pietro disappeared, she is confused and at times it seems that she is losing her mind. Every time I come here she behaves worse and worse.”

Then she asked her mother, “Who was helping you this morning? Verginia?”

Grandmother moved her head from side to side. “Was it Giuliana?” she asked her again. The old woman nodded. “What is a matter with you?” she reproached her. “Why don’t you answer me?”

Grandmother mumbled something again and remained standing with her back against the sink, as if it was giving her support.

Giulio’s mother inspected everything in the kitchen and proceeded to do it in the bedroom. Giulio put his arm around Grandmother’s shoulders and was talking to her gently, I saw her lips moving, but I couldn’t hear her saying anything.

Now that Giulio was standing next to her, I could see that she was very short, with a curved back and frail body. Her hands, with the fingers deformed by arthritis, were clutched tightly below her round belly, as if she were holding it from falling down. Her face was heavily wrinkled and her gray long hair was pulled up, but it was in disarray. She wore an old discolored dress and an apron.

Giulio’s mother returned to the kitchen and said to her mother, “Why did you put on that old dress? You have several good dresses in your wardrobe. Pietro was taking good care of you.”

“Pietro... Pietro...” faintly repeated the old woman, but couldn’t say anything else.

“I have to talk to Verginia to keep you neatly dressed,” continued her daughter without paying any attention that her mother was not answering any of her questions. But she continued to tell her about other things that she was finding wrong. She opened the cupboard and inspected what food she had there and rearranged some dishes on the shelves.

“Mamma,” said Giulio, “go easy on Grandmother. Don’t you see that she is confused?”

“I know, I know,” she answered. “We have to do something about her, because she cannot live alone any more. Neither I, nor Uncle Duilio, could take her to live with the family, especially now that you are staying with us. You know that Uncle Duilio also lives in an apartment that has only one bedroom and a kitchen, in which their two daughters are sleeping and where he also works in one corner as a shoemaker?”

She looked around and said, “It would have been a nice place for you to live here with Grandmother, but the authorities notified us already that they were requisitioning the club quarters and that she had to leave this place. I told Uncle Duilio to take care of this matter. He had already put her on the list and she is waiting when there would be a bed available for her at Cotolengo.[4] There are so many old people waiting to be admitted there. Now they are taking only the sick in the emergency cases.”

Although there were the chairs in the kitchen, nobody thought to sit down, it seems that for some unknown reason we had to leave at any moment. And it really was the case, because Giulio’s mother suddenly decided that we had stayed there long enough and said, “Well, let’s go. Maybe this afternoon we will have enough time to visit my brother.” She gave a quick kiss on the cheek to her mother and said to her, “Don’t forget to lock the door.” Giulio also kissed his grandmother and I tried to embrace her, but it was awkward because she tried to withdraw from me, so I reached only with my hand to touch her shoulder.

We waited for a long time for the streetcar, which arrived full to capacity, so Giulio decided to wait for another one, because he didn’t want my body to be squeezed too much in my last weeks of pregnancy. Therefore we arrived later than expected at

our streetcar stop at Corso Novara.

"Well," said Mamma, "we still could make a quick visit to Uncle Duilio, just to tell him that you arrived home safe and sound and to surprise him with the news that you are married."

Giulio's uncle Duilio lived on the ground floor in the apart¬ment building on one of the side streets, not far from the Parish Church, and we walked again through Via Favria. One window and the entrance door to his kitchen directly faced the narrow sidewalk. Giulio looked through the window, then knocked at the door.

His aunt Verginia quickly opened the door and called loudly, "Giulio! What a surprise! *Ciao, caro*!" She barely allowed him to enter the door before she embraced him.

Uncle Duilio came next to salute his nephew, exclaiming, "Look who is here! How are you Giulio?"

Cousins, Giuliana and Rita followed the example of their parents. With all these embraces and confusion nobody paid any attention that Mamma and I were standing at the door on the sidewalk and that we couldn't come in because they all were crowded around Giulio and obstructed the passage.

Mamma interrupted their rejoicing by shouting, "May we come in?" Only then did they move away from the door so we could enter.

"*Ciao!" "Ciao!"* all saluted us.

Giulio took this moment to present me to his relatives. He put his arm around my shoulders and said, "This is my wife, Lala. I brought her with me from Germany, but she is Russian."

There were a few moments of a surprised silence. Then, bowing their heads, they said, "Nice to meet you!" and "It is a pleasure to know you."

I also bowed in response and only said, *"Ciao! Ciao!"*

And Giulio explained my limited greetings, "She doesn't speak Italian yet."

Everybody smiled and commented something about it, but Giulio did not bother to translate it to me.

We all remained standing in the kitchen and all were asking Giulio questions, which I couldn't understand. Then I saw Mamma engage her sister-in-law in a discussion and they sat at the table. Aunt Verginia invited me to sit next to them. Although I couldn't fully understand what they were saying, I knew that they were talking about Giulio's grandmother. Then Mamma pointed at me and told her that she would soon become a grandmother, and Aunt Verginia congratulated me.

> Uncle Duilio and his daughters were standing in the middle of the kitchen and talking with Giulio. I had very little chance to observe them. Finally, Aunt Verginia said that she would make coffee, but Mamma stopped her, "Some other time. It's late and we have to go home now. We just came to tell you that Giulio returned home." She got up and called, "Giulio, we have to go. Babbo and Domenico will be home soon."

And we left in a chorus of voices: *"Ciao!" "Ciao!" "Ciao!"* "Come back soon!"

As we walked back home, Mamma said to Giulio, "Tomorrow will be already Wednesday; it will be the fifth day that you returned home. We have to go and visit my cousins Derna and Oberto. Just to be sure that Oberto will be home, we will go there late in the afternoon. And on Thursday we should visit my cousins Dina and Enrico. They will be upset if you wait longer from seeing them. We shall visit Mario on Sunday."

"Okay, you are right," agreed Giulio.

"You shouldn't forget that you need to find soon who want to be a godmother and

a godfather for your child. When I had mentioned to Verginia that you will have a baby, she didn't volunteer for it."

"There is plenty of time for it, Mamma," replied Giulio.

At the suppertime everything was as usual. Domenico went out right away after he finished eating, but he advised Giulio that he would return home not too late. The evening chores were a repeat of yesterday, with the socks mending as the last chore of the day. Babbo and Giulio again had their discussion about the Italian politics, but either they had a less controversial topic, or maybe Giulio decided not to disagree with his father, who didn't raise his voice even once during the whole evening. Before going to bed, Babbo reminded Giulio not to forget the appointment with his company's lawyer. Domenico came home early, soon after Giulio prepared their couch for the night. I was tired from all that walking during the day and Giulio sent me to bed right after his brother came home.

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1. From the photographs Photo Colombo, Piazza Castello, Torino, October 15, 1945.
2. See the chapter "Busy Monday For Giulio."
3. "Hi, Grandmother!" [in Italian].
4. A charitable Catholic Institution run by the nuns of the Order of Cotolengo for care of the poor elderly, sick, incapacitated, and handicapped.

Chapter 34

A Provision For Civil Marriage

By Olga Gladky Verro
Also as Remembered by Giulio Verro

On Wednesday morning, October 17, Giulio accompanied me for a visit to the doctor who found my pregnancy normal and said that we should expect the baby in about three-and-half weeks. From there we went to the Post Office to find out if we could mail letters to Poland and France. Although they were not sure how long it would take for mail to these countries to begin to function, they told us that it could happen any day and we should inquire often. This was good news for me, because I wanted to notify my mother as soon as possible about our safe arrival; also it was important to get my new address to Monsieur Demey, who gave us his address as a reference in case my mother, father and I would be separated in the confusion of the war. I was hoping that maybe he had some news about whereabouts of my father.

In the afternoon we went with Giulio to see the lawyer in his office at the Headquarters of the Turin's Municipal Streetcar Enterprise. On our way there, Giulio told me that if he were going to help us, we would need to explain our saga and exactly why and how we got our certificate of marriage, on the basis of which my temporary passport was issued. I agreed that the lawyer needed to know the truth.

The lawyer's simple and informal manners made us both feel, right away, at ease. Giulio told him that we had arrived only Saturday from Munich on the Red Cross convoy train repatriating Italian prisoners of war from Germany. He presented me as a Russian, or more accurately, a Soviet citizen. And he went on explaining to him that at the end of the war we found ourselves to be in Poland, occupied by the Soviet Army; that NKVD issued strict orders to the local Polish government offices and churches forbidding them to perform marriages between Soviet citizens and citizens of any other country.

"Since we were determined to remain together, because we loved each other," explained Giulio, "and we wanted that our child would have both parents, we tried any possible way to do it legally. The last hope vanished when we asked the Soviet consul in Warsaw[1] to give us permission to marry. His cold and cynic answer was, 'There were millions of children left without fathers during this war. One more will not make any difference. Each of you has to return to your own country. Those are our orders, there are no exceptions!'

"There was no other choice for us, but to find other ways to remain together. That's when we purchased from the town hall employee a certificate of marriage. It was on the official standard form and was stamped with the town hall office seal, but it wasn't entered in the Registry of Marriages. It allowed us to have a right of passage on the Polish Red Cross convoy train repatriating the Italian prisoners of war. When we arrived in Prague, the Italian consulate checked our documents and issued a temporary passport based on the certificate of marriage, which they kept for their records." And

Giulio gave my temporary passport to the lawyer for inspection.

"Well," said the lawyer, "your temporary passport was valid only for the entry in this country, it is not a valid document for any other purpose."

"That's why we came to see you," said Giulio, "to find out if you can help us." Giulio explained further, "Upon our arrival, we went right away in my Parish to make an appointment for a church wedding, but the priest required that we both be Catholics. Since Olga's religion is Russian Orthodox, the priest told her that she had to con¬vert to Catholic faith by taking the lessons in catechism, learning the prayers, and passing the exams. It would take a long time, which we don't have, because our baby will be born in about three weeks."

Then Giulio asked, "Could the civil marriage in the City Hall be done before the birth of our baby?"

"Yes," replied the lawyer. "There is a provision for the civil marriage in the cases of emergency registration. It is very good thing that you are not legally married because one of the requirements is that each of you makes a sworn, witnessed, and notarized statement declaring that you are not and had never been married. In addition to this declaration, you, Giulio, need only your birth certificate. As for the bride's birth certificate, which is in Russian, she needs to have a witnessed and notarized statement written in Italian stating her date of birth, place of birth, and the names of her father and mother."

The lawyer wrote all the instructions and explained to Giulio how and where all this had to be done and how many witnesses we needed for the notarized documents and for the marriage registration. "You can do it all by yourself, you don't need a lawyer to do it."

"I have already used this temporary passport to register Olga in the City Hall for residency, food coupons, and ID Card. Could it become a problem after we get married when the dates and place of marriage change?"

"Did they keep a copy of this document in any of these offices?" asked the lawyer.

"No. They just copied from it her name and the date of marriage."

"Then there shouldn't be any problem to correct it at a later date," he reassured us. "If you should encounter any problems, come and see me in this office at any time."

He didn't want any compensation for his advice, because it was done as a service for a family member of an employee of the Municipal Streetcar Enterprise. He wished us, "Good luck!" We sincerely thanked him for his help and departed from his office in a happy mood.

We were relieved that there were no problems for what only yesterday seemed to be an insurmountable task. Giulio cheerfully said, "Now we really need to visit all my cousins, because we need to recruit some of them to be our witnesses for your birth certificate, for the declaration that we were never married, and for our marriage registration."

When we returned home, the first thing his mother asked was, "What have you found from the lawyer?"

Without going into every detail Giulio told her that there were no problems, that we could register our marriage in the City Hall, and that it could be done before the baby's birth. Then he looked at his watch and said, "There is not enough time left for a visit to Derna and Oberto."

The suppertime and the evening by now were predictable. However, this time Babbo and Domenico were interested more in our visit to the lawyer. Domenico went out right away after he finished eating, but as he did the previous evening, he advised Giulio that he would return home soon. The remainder of the evening was also the same

as yesterday's, including socks mending. Babbo and Giulio again discussed Italian politics, but it was a quiet talk without any outbursts from Babbo, because they agreed on the main expectations of referendum for the elections; they both decided to vote against monarchy and to vote for Italy to become a Republic.

I was eager to write a letter to my mother and, after repairing a few holes in one sock, I asked Giulio to find me paper and pen and to explain to his mother that I needed to do it right away. I began to write my first letter to her in French,[2] as we agreed not to write in Russian for fear that the NKVD could somehow find her. It took me a long time to write, because I couldn't concentrate while Giulio and Babbo were speaking Italian.

As soon as Babbo and Mamma went to bed, Giulio took all the chairs to prepare the couch for the night. I sat on the low chair and quickly finished my letter.

Giulio told me, "Domenico will be home soon. You are tired from all the walking during the day, you better go to sleep before he comes home."

From the previous night we knew that the two of us were uncomfortable sitting on that small low chair and we remained standing as we wished good night by embracing, hugging, and kissing for a while, until we heard Domenico's steps on the balcony.

"I miss you so much, Lala," said Giulio slowly releasing me from his embrace.

"I miss you too, Giulyen'ka," I replied walking toward the bedroom door.

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1. See the chapter "The Trip to Warsaw."
2. See the chapter "Refuge in the Home of Rufin and Lidia."

Chapter 35

Mamma Keeps the Family Purse Strings

By Olga Gladky Verro
Also as Remembered by Giulio Verro

Thursday morning didn't bring any surprises in the routine of Verro's family, as well as in what was expected of me in contributing to the household chores, including my walking with Mamma to the open market and to the shops to buy fresh provi¬sions for the day, and cooking the meal. That morning Giulio went to STIPEL's office to get his company's uniform and tools.

When he returned home shortly before lunch, he showed us his brand new black leather bag with the tools and the sturdy cotton uniform with the STIPEL name on a shirt pocket and on a cap. He asked his mother to shorten pants and sleeves.

> I was unpleasantly surprised that he asked her to do the alterations. "Why didn't he ask me to do it?" I thought. "He knows that I can use sewing machine."

I was distracted from my unhappy thoughts by Giulio's next surprise. With a dramatic gesture he showed us an envelope and declared, "Look what else I have received from STIPEL! Here is the two-week marriage leave gratuity money!"

He pulled out of the envelope some money explaining to his mother that this time he needed to keep larger allowance; he justified that he needed it for the expenses involved with the documents and fees we would need to pay for our marriage certificate in the City Hall, for the streetcar tickets, and a few extra liras he borrowed from Domenico when we arrived. Then, with a humble expression he tendered to his mother the envelope with the rest of the money and said, "Here, Mamma, I hope it will be enough to feed me and Lala until my first payday."

His mother took the envelope, as if she was expecting it to be given to her. As she was counting the money, her face was lighting up with satisfaction and she replied, "Now I don't have to worry about the money. I am glad you remembered to give me the envelope with your wages, as you used to do it before." Then with bitter expression on her face she complained, "You know, from the time Domenico returned to live with us, he is keeping all the money for himself and gives me only what he thinks is enough for feeding him. The rest he spends on...I don't know on what, probably, on 'that girl.' I would like to know if he would have a courage to ask me to buy for him a new shirt, or underwear when he shall need them." And she went to the bedroom to put the money in a safe place.

Giulio turned toward me and explained, "I always gave all my wages to my mother, except, I kept for myself a small allowance, which I also kept now for us. My mother uses the money for the needs of the whole family. We are now a part of this family and, if we should need to buy something we shall ask her if she has enough money in her family kitty, and she will buy it for us."

Mamma returned from the bedroom and told Giulio to put on his uniform so she

could mark how much it needed to be shortened.

As the two of them were busy with fitting, I realized that Giulio had presented to me as a matter of fact that in his family Mamma was keeping the family purse strings. What I could say to him? I felt that it was right to contribute our part for living expenses, but at the same time I felt that Giulio completely relinquished control of his money and that both Giulio and I were left out of any decision as to how his money was spent. Even more, I was humiliated by the fact that if we needed to buy something for our personal use, we had to ask his mother a favor to buy it for us.

Then I reasoned, "If Giulio feels that he should give all his wages to his mother, there is nothing that I can do about it. I have no other choice, but to compromise and not challenge Mother's authority over the family's money. Until we find our own place to live, this cannot be done without provoking his mother's discontent, and maybe anger. On the other side, Domenico probably is right to give his mother only a part of his wages."

However, I was very surprised by the contrast of Giulio's behavior here compared to Laband, where my mother had given him all the money that they were making at the market in Katowitz.

There, the three of us had made the decisions on how to spend it and what to buy, or, if the decision had to be made on the spot at the market, the two of them made it together. And, although my mother had more savoir-faire, experience, and initiative in their market deals, she was treating Giulio as the head of the family. My mother was following our family tradition, where it was my father who kept the money, paid the bills, and kept the record of family budget. And from the time I was only in my teens, the decisions about the major expenses were discussed by all three of us, while the everyday food expenses were in the hands of my mother.

When the fitting was done, Giulio looked at his watch and said to me, "Help me to set the table in a hurry before Babbo arrives for lunch. He gets very angry if the table is not set or the food is not ready, because he likes to have some time to rest after the meal and to read newspaper before he goes back to work." We had just finished setting the table when Babbo arrived, and Giulio helped Mamma to drain the spaghetti.

Giulio proudly told his father about receiving from the STIPEL money, uniform, and tools. Babbo reminded him again, "I am glad that you have listen to me and found a job with the public service company. Besides the job security, you have many other benefits that the other companies would never offer to its workers."

After Babbo was gone, the three of us quickly did all the after lunch chores, including Giulio washing the kitchen floor.

Then we were ready to go and visit Derna and Oberto.

Chapter 36

Meeting Giulio's Relatives

By Olga Gladky Verro
Also as Remembered by Giulio Verro

Thursday afternoon Mamma, Giulio and I went to visit Mamma's cousins Derna and Oberto. To get to them we had to walk on Corso Palermo past movie theater "Palermo," then turn into a smaller secondary street. They also lived in a multistory apartment house, but it was a better type of building with separate main entrances for each staircase and only two apartments on each landing.

We found both Derna and Oberto home and they received us with lots of affection, embraces, and kisses. It was not a complete surprise for them to see Giulio and me. Derna told us, "Verginia came to see us the other evening, right away after the supper. She couldn't resist the temptation to tell us the news about Giulio's arrival with the foreign wife."

From the first moment I liked both Derna and Oberto, who impressed me with their genuinely pleasant disposition and a sincere hospitality. Derna immediately invited us to remove our coats and to sit down on the couch in the kitchen. Oberto offered Giulio a glass of wine, while Derna put a pot of coffee on the stove.

As we were sipping chicory coffee, Derna asked me when the baby was due; and she complimented me that I had such nice and fresh skin complexion during pregnancy. Mamma took the initiative and said to Derna, "By the way, now that we are talking about the birth of the baby, Giulio wanted to ask you about something." And she prompted her son, "Giulio, now it is the right time to tell Derna about the christening of your baby."

"Oh, Mamma, stop it," replied Giulio, "there is plenty of time to talk about this later."

"No, no," she insisted, "ask her about it now.

"Oh, Mamma!" replied Giulio this time with real annoyance.

"All right," said Derna in a pacifying manner, "what your mother wanted you to tell me?"

"Well," Giulio replied, "let me ask Lala about it first." And he explained to me that he was going to ask Derna to be the godmother for our child if I agreed.

"I like her," I said. "Go ahead and ask.; I will be glad if she would accept it."

Then, with humility, Giulio asked, "Derna, I want to ask you before asking anybody else about this. Would you do me and my wife Lala the honor to be our baby's godmother?"

Derna embraced Giulio and then me and without hesitation replied, "I shall be glad to be your baby's godmother. My god-daughter Fiorina[1] is already looking to find for herself a husband—so I am ready to have another godchild."

"Lala and I are very happy that you accept this responsibility. I know that you were very good godmother to Fiorina."

Mamma was all smiles satisfied with her choice of a godmother for her

grandchild and she asked Derna, “Whom you would suggest to ask to be a godfather?”

“Maybe Domenico,” answered Derna.

“Are you joking?” replied Mamma. “How could he be a godfather, when he is not able to be a father for his own daughter?”

“Then you should ask Mario. I think that he would be a good godfather,” suggested Derna.

“Giulio,” said Mamma, “did you hear that? Sunday we shall visit Mario and will ask him about it.”

“Yes, Mamma,” replied Giulio. “Thank you, Derna, your suggestion.”

Giulio decided that this was the opportune moment for him to ask Derna for another favor and explained to her, “We have a problem registering here our marriage, because the City Hall needs an original document to be sent directly from Poland and it will take a long time to wait for it, because the mail service didn’t resumed yet; who knows when we could even send a request for it. We need it for food coupons, and medical insurance for doctors and a hospital for childbirth and for the baby.”

He told to Derna and Oberto the whole story about the Parish priest who demanded that I become a Catholic; and about a visit to a lawyer who suggested that there was a quicker way to do it. “We just have to get married again in the City Hall before the baby is born! That’s when we shall need you Derna to be our witness,” concluded Giulio almost jokingly and added, “ We also will need your help to witness in the City Hall some documents for us and for Lala.”

“Of course,” she answered promptly, “just let me know when you shall need me.”

“Thank you Derna, I knew that I count on your help.”

Oberto, who was quietly listening to all this, now commented, “Everywhere there is a bureaucracy. And the church is the worst.” And I was surprised that he also, as was the case with Babbo, made a long monologue against the priests and the church.

Then Oberto and Giulio sat at the table and had good and friendly talk about politics and the coming general elections. Oberto was a simple worker at the factory Villar Perosa, which manufactured ball bearings. Like many Italian workers, he also had communist ideas, but he didn’t insist as fervently as did Babbo in trying to convince Giulio that the Communists would win the elections.

Meanwhile, Mamma recounted to Derna about problems with her mother. That much I could already understand without Giulio’s translating for me in French.

Since I was not directly involved in these conversations, I had plenty of time to observe. Derna was sitting on the chair almost opposite me, and the more I looked at her, the more I liked her, with round face with full and rosy cheeks and smiling brown eyes which were like a mirror of her cheerful and amiable personality. And the crown of the brown naturally wavy hair added softness to her pleasant facial features. She wore a nice close-fitting dress that followed the shape of her body. All parts of her plump figure were connected with smooth curves, making it hard to see where the neck was connected to the chest and where the arms were connected to the shoulders. I had the impression that she should feel very soft to the touch. She had gentle manners and a smooth harmonious voice, which added to her peaceful and pleasant demeanor.

Oberto was a rather large boned man with a slow way of moving that reminded me of a bear. He was calm, but had a tendency to speak louder then his wife, and his manners were somewhat crude, but not vulgar. However, he displayed a genuine

friendliness and hospitality that complemented his wife's attitude.

I had also plenty of time to look around the kitchen. I saw that near the door, which had a large window, stood a treadle sewing machine that was open and had a garment in the process of sewing lying on its table. I got up and went to see what Derna was sewing. It was a dress for somebody else, because it was quite small in size to be for her short and full figure. She saw me inspecting her work and said, "It is for Mario's daughter Fiorina."

I saw that the door led to a small private balcony, which was a sign of better housing. Their apartment had just one bedroom, but it had a small entrance hall and a private toilet, which made it more prestigious. In addition, in the kitchen a portion of the wall was covered with white tiles near the white marble sink, stove, and small counter between them, which made it look neat and bright.

Mamma looked outside the window, asked Giulio what time it was, and said, "If we hurry, we just might visit my cousins Dina and Enrico on our way home."

"That's a good idea," said Giulio. "We have plenty of time before Babbo and Domenico come home." We all got up and, being prompted by Mamma to do it quickly, saluted Derna and Oberto in a real hurry.

Giulio said to Derna, "I shall call on you soon to come with us to the City Hall to witness the documents."

Dina and her husband Enrico Macchi lived with their teenage daughter Iella in a multistory apartment on Corso Palermo only a few houses away from where Giulio's family lived. The buildings were similar, but their apartment was only on the third floor. Mamma told Giulio, "You knock at the door to surprise them."

As the door opened Giulio said, "*Buon giorno.*[2] May I come in?"

Indeed, the happy sound of voices resounded, "Giulio!"
"Giulio! When did you arrive?" And Dina and Iella embraced him with sincere joy.
When Mamma and I entered the room, Giulio presented me, "This is my wife Lala."

I greeted them, "*Buon giorno*!" followed by Giulio's explanation, "She doesn't speak Italian; she is Russian."[3] This seemed to be an even bigger surprise for them than seeing Giulio, because all the relatives knew that he had been engaged and they knew his fiancée. However, they were discrete enough not to ask anything, maybe believing that I didn't know. But I saw that Dina took Mamma aside and whispered something.

Of course, as soon as I removed my coat, Dina right away asked when the baby was due and Giulio proudly told her, "Soon, in a few weeks."

Dina prepared chicory coffee and served it without sugar,
as a matter of fact, no excuses. Soon Dina's husband, Enrico, arrived from work and more surprise, embracing, and presenting me followed.

As conversation began, from a few words that I could guess, I understood that Enrico was curious to hear from Giulio about the situation in Europe, and his daughter Iella listened with attention too, and Mamma was talking to Dina about what to do with her mother.

I sat quietly observing the apartment. It consisted only of a kitchen and a bedroom. I thought, "Probably most of the working class apartments in this neighborhood were built at the same period." The kitchen had a couch on which their daughter probably slept. There was a table and chairs in the middle of the room; a bare electric light bulb hung from the high ceiling. There was a simple cupboard, metal

woodstove, and the sink. And there was a small bookshelf with a few textbooks and notebooks that indicated their daughter was going to school.

I changed my observation to people. Enrico was tall and very skinny with a long bony face; and his dark hair accentuated these features. Although he smiled and rejoiced when he greeted Giulio, now in serious conversation he had a somber and almost unhappy expression. His daughter Iella had a bony body and a face resembling her father's, but her teenage face was very homely, more so because of purplish acne patches. But her eyes were lively expressing curiosity as she listened to Giulio's story.

Dina, in contrast, was plump and short, or maybe she seemed to me to be like that because of comparison to her tall husband and daughter. She had nice wavy brown hair and clear complexion. Once in a while she looked at me and smiled, as if she was trying to communicate to me without words her friendly feelings.

We had visited with them for about a half hour when Mamma asked Giulio what time it was and exclaimed, "We have to go, because *Menico*[4] and *Gardo*[5] will be coming home soon." We said a quick "Good-bye" and we left in a hurry.

As we were on our way home, Mamma said to Giulio, "I waited for a while to hear if Dina would ask me if we have someone in mind to be a godmother for your baby. When she didn't mention anything, I told her that we asked Derna and she accepted. It is better this way. Stingy as they are, you couldn't expect from her good gifts for the baby."

"Mamma!" Giulio reproached her, "I asked Derna to be a godmother because she is a very good and kind woman, not because she would give gifts to my child!"

"What is the matter?" I asked Giulio. "Why are you upset with Mamma?" He reluctantly translated their conversation.

We arrived home just in time to get supper ready. I was getting used to the routine and helped Giulio to set the table and helped Mamma with the dishes after the meal. It was a repetition of what happened in previous evenings. After supper Domenico went out again and Babbo talked with Giulio about Italian politics. And then the sewing box appeared on the table and Mamma and I again mended socks. There was a big bunch of them and I estimated that if we mended every evening we definitely would not finish them all before the baby was born.

That evening Domenico returned even earlier then usual and joined in the ongoing conversation between Babbo and Giulio. Al though the elections were not scheduled until the summer of 1946, Babbo never tired talking about politics. And he always talked in a tone of voice that was meant to impress his sons that he was very knowledgeable in political matters. This meant that Communists were always right, and that they offered a better choice for the workers than any other party. Therefore, the conversation was mostly a monologue because Giulio didn't want to contradict and upset his father.

That evening, I waited until Babbo and Mamma went to bed then followed them shortly thereafter. Giulio gave me a quick good night kiss near the bedroom door, making me understand that in the presence of his brother he didn't feel comfortable embracing and hugging me, as had became our intimate ritual and a way of expressing our affection from the time we arrived in Turin.

It was already the sixth night that I was sleeping with my in laws in their big bed and I was terribly missing Giulio close to me. I rationalized that we were doing all in an order of priorities and that I should have patience. But it was not a consolation for me

when in the dark I lay on the edge of the bed, afraid to move and to disturb my mother-in-law.

The next morning, when Giulio came to wake me up, he said to me, "Do you realize, Lala, that today already is Friday. Tomorrow will be a week that we arrived in Italy. It was such a busy week, but we accomplished a lot."

"You have accomplished it," I corrected him.

"We still have another busy week ahead of us," he said. "Today I will go to the City Hall and find out exactly where all the offices are to make all our documents that the lawyer told us to do. Now, next week we need only to call Derna and another two witnesses to go with us. By the way, last night Domenico told me that he would come as the second witness. Now we need to find only the third witness."

When Giulio was gone, Mamma and I went to the market. She stopped on our floor landing to greet one of her neighbors who lived in one of the corner apartments. She presented me to her as Giulio's foreign wife. And she introduced her as *la Signora* Bacci. She proudly said, "She is *la Toscana*,[6] like me."

When Mamma told her that I was Russian and was alone in this country, Signora Bacci showed me a warm friendliness that was very unusual for a neighbor. She em¬braced me and gave me such a tight hug that, although I was wearing a light coat, I felt her skinny body and arms and it made a strange impression on me.

When mamma and I were walking to the market, Mamma explained that Signora Bacci had a breast cancer, but that she had refused to have her breast removed, because she was convinced that some cure would be found very soon and she didn't have to be mutilated.

When Giulio returned home, Signora Bacci came to greet him and brought home-made cookies as a homecoming gift for him and me. With the shortage of sugar at that time it was a truly friendly gesture. Mamma later explained that Signor Bacci was a very good master marble mason and earned good money, so they could afford to buy sugar and all rationed foods on the black market.

Giulio took this occasion to explain and to ask Signora Bacci if she could be our third witness for the procedures in the City Hall. She gladly accepted it.

Giulio set the date for doing all preliminary papers for Monday morning on October 22. And he went to notify Derna to come with us on that date.

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1. Daughter of Mario Cortopassi, "The Franchini's Family Tree," Foglio No.6.
2. "Good day!" [in Italian].
3. Soviet citizens were commonly called Russians without distinction to their nationality, as Ukrainian in my case.
4. Nickname name for Domenico.
5. Nickname name for Ermengardo (Giulio's father).

Chapter37

Uncle Pietro’s Mattresses

By Olga Gladky Verro
Also as Remembered by Giulio Verro

On Friday, late in the afternoon, Mamma’s niece Giuliana unexpectedly brought the bad news, “Today Grandmother fell and broke her hip and she couldn’t move or talk; she probably had a stroke. My father arranged to bring her to Cotolengo’s emergency room. He is hoping that after she recovers she would be admitted to the Cotolengo’s nursing home, because it is an emergency case and she was already on their waiting list.”

Mamma asked her niece about visiting hours at the hospital and told her niece that she would go to visit her mother tomorrow afternoon. She told Domenico, “You are coming with Giulio and me to visit your grandmother too, therefore, don’t plan to go anywhere until we return from Cotolengo.”

On Saturday morning Giulio got up very early, sometime before six o’clock, and went to the public bathhouse to be among the first to enter when they opened their doors at seven. At that hour the line was short and he was home before I got up.

“This morning I am clean as an angel,” he told me while waking me up with the good morning kiss. “After the baby is born and your body returns to the normal shape I will bring you to take the shower in the bathhouse. You know, there is no privacy there, and right now you probably will feel very uncomfortable that the other naked women will see you.” And he added, “This afternoon, when Mamma, Domenico, and I will go to visit my grandmother, you will remain alone at home and should take a bath in the small washtub as you did before.”

When after lunch chores were done, including washing the kitchen floor, Giulio, Domenico, and Mamma went to visit her mother at the Cottolengo Hospital. Before leaving, Giulio warned me, “Please, don’t wash your hair in the sink—use a little round tub and pour the dirty water in the pail used to wash the floor and discard it outside in the latrine—my mother gets very upset if she finds even one hair in the kitchen sink.”

It was a real pleasure to finally be able to take care of my body. I enjoyed my bath but, most of all, I felt good to have my privacy, to be alone without all the people being in the kitchen as happened in the mornings when I washed my face.

When I went outside on the balcony to discard the water in the latrine, I met the woman who lived in the apartment past our door. Giulio told me that his mother did not speak with her neighbor for several years after they quarreled about something. The woman was washing a patch of balcony floor in front of her door. She smiled at me and said, “I am *Madamin* Sartoris.”

I answered, “*Buon giorno*!”

And she asked, “Are you Giulio’s wife?”

“Yes,” I replied.

"Then you are *Madamin* Verro." I understood and smiled. She wanted to talk to me, but after the warm bath and with the wet hair I didn't feel like staying outside on the cold drafty balcony and, smiling again, I politely told her, "Excuse me, I don't speak Italian."

"Ah!" she exclaimed with surprise and said something that I couldn't understand. And I quickly got inside.

Giulio explaintd to me later why the neighdor called me *Madamin:* In Piedmonteise tradition, when the mother-in-law is living she is referred to as "*Madama*" and her daughter-in-law is referred to as *"Madamin."*

Only Mamma and Giulio returned home. Giulio told me, "Domenico went somewhere directly from the hospital." About his grandmother he said that she was in a very bad condition and didn't recognize them. They couldn't find any answers from the nuns, who told them they should talk to the doctor during weekdays—in this charitable hospital doctors donated their time and services on a voluntary basis and were not available on weekends. One thing was almost sure, Grandmother would not return to her apartment and would remain at Cottolengo Institution.

Mamma was worrying about her mother's belongings, and especially about her brother Pietro's mattresses, which she wanted to get for Giulio. She decided to go immediately to her brother Duilio to settle this matter with him. Giulio said to her, "I thought that when the person was admitted to Cottolengo, the institution was taking all their possessions as a token of their payment for their care."

"Yes, yes," replied his mother, "but we don't have to give them everything. We could leave them what we don't need. Nobody would check what we take." Giulio shook his head in a sign of disapproval. But his mother justified herself, "Most of the things belonged to my brother Pietro, they don't belong to my mother. We don't have to give his property to Cottolengo." And she left in a hurry.

When Mamma returned from her brother, she was furious and upset to the degree that Giulio initially couldn't make sense of what she was saying. She repeatedly shouted, "That scoundrel of my brother! That scoundrel!"

Giulio was trying to calm her down, "Mamma, sit down, don't get excited. Tell us what happened when you calm yourself."

But she couldn't stop and continued with outrage to complain, "Between him and his wife they already cleaned up my mother's place of all the best things my brother Pietro had!"

Then, gesticulating furiously with her hands she denounced her brother's action, "And my brother Pietro's mattresses! Those nice almost new mattresses my brother made from the good new wool just before the war started! They are already on Giuliana and Rita's couch! And listen to this, my brother Duilio had the impudence to say that his daughters' mattresses were too old and they needed badly new ones.

"I told him that my poor Giulio, who had just returned home from the prisoners of the war camps in Germany, does not have any mattress at all to put on the floor to sleep, and he needed those mattresses more than his daughters who had slept on the old ones until now and nothing happen to them.

"Could you imagine what his answer was? He said that he, his wife, and his

daughters took care of the Mother three times more then I did and, therefore, he had the right to have the first choice of what he wanted to take."

She took her breath, and then with indignation complained, "And he had the impertinence to tell me to go tomorrow in a hurry to my mother's apartment and take what I wanted before the Cottolengo's agents will come on Monday to take the rest of her belongings. But he warned me that I couldn't take my mother's mattresses, because he was advised that she needs them for her bed at Cottolengo."

Finally, Mamma sat on the chair, put her elbows on the table, put her palms on her forehead and began to cry. Giulio put his arm around her shoulders and said quietly, "Let them have those mattresses. They have more right to have them than I. They took care of Grandmother and I didn't."

Mamma was so exhausted from her emotional outburst that she didn't argue with Giulio's reasoning. She only said, "My brother did great injustice to me and to my sister, Elvira. Why he didn't call me to go together and divide justly and peacefully between him, my sister, and me what we could take?" She raised her voice, "No! He purposely didn't tell me anything and just grabbed what he wanted and left to us what he didn't want. I shall never forgive him for this. And I shall never talk to him or to his wife again for as long as I live. They are as good as dead for me!"

When Babbo and Domenico came home from work, Mamma had the renewed energy to repeat as forcefully as before the story about the mattresses.

Babbo told her, "What have you expected from your brother? He does everything that his wife tells him to do. And you know how shrewd she is. You are right not to talk to them any more."

Domenico took this episode very casually and didn't give much importance to it, limiting himself to a few calming words for his mother.

The next day, Sunday afternoon, the visit to cousin Mario was postponed until the next Sunday and Mamma went with Giulio to her mother's apartment; they returned with a bundle of bed linen and towels, a box with some dishes, and memorabilia of her brother Pietro. Mamma complained again that all the good things were taken by her brother Duilio and his wife. And she swore again, "I shall never talk to them as long as I live!"

Giulio wanted me to get out of the apartment to breathe some fresh air, and before supper we went for a half-hour walk in the neighborhood. As we leisurely strolled holding each other tightly arm-in-arm, Giulio tried to justify his mother's outburst and be¬havior. "You should understand that my mother never could buy things for the home as she would have wanted. My father's wages were sufficient only to feed and to clothe the four of us and to pay for the rent and utilities. She was very frugal and could afford to buy only the essential items, for which she had to save for very long time. For her a good mattress made from the new wool represents a precious possession. And her brother indeed behaved as a villain toward both of his sisters." I agreed that his mother was right to be upset.

Chapter 38

Filing Marriage Application

By Olga Gladky Verro
Also as Remembered by Giulio Verro

On Sunday evening Giulio wrote in Italian a translation of my birth certificate, because the original that was written in Russian was not acceptable as a document for the marriage license.

On Monday morning, October 22, the five of us, Derna, Signora Bacci, Domenico, Giulio, and I, took the streetcar to the City Hall. There were a lot of people waiting already to get into the Notary office and we had to stay for a long time in line.

There were many notices on the bulletin boards in the hall where we were standing and to pass the time Giulio went to read them. He returned all excited and told me that one notice was about the food subsidy provided by UNRRA[1] for the needy small children and for the pregnant women, and that it was distributed in Palazzo Reale.[2] "We shall go tomorrow and register you," said Giulio. "Mamma will be pleased to hear this news, because she is complaining that the rations with the food coupons are very small."

After our witnesses signed before Notary the Italian translation of my birth certificate, we had to go to another office where we had to wait in line again. There, we and our witnesses had to sign Declarations made by Giulio and me that we had never been married before.

Then in another office Giulio and I made an application for marriage; to it had to be attached another form that we had to fill in, a request for waiving the announcements and waiting period by reason of imminent birth of a child. The employee told Giulio, "After the war ended we have so many applications for marriage that there is a huge backlog. It is impossible to do it right away this week. You should come next Friday to find out the date of your marriage registration."

And Giulio replied with a joke, "Let's hope that the baby will not make a surprise and decides to arrive before that date!"

On our way to the streetcar stop Giulio and I expressed our gratitude to Derna, Signora Bacci, and Domenico for being so kind to come as our witnesses and to endure all the waiting standing on their feet; we stopped at the nearby café and Giulio treated all with a cup of coffee.

We came to the streetcar boarding area shortly after twelve o'clock when workers and employees were rushing home for lunch. At that time in Italy most people who didn't work in shifts had a two hours lunch break from twelve to two o'clock and most of them went home to eat with the family, rest, and then return to work until six o'clock in the evening. Therefore, we had to wait for our turn to get aboard the tightly packed car. Giulio paid for all the tickets but we had to stay on our feet and, as the passengers got off at their stops, we slowly moved toward the back exit.

We had almost reached the back landing of the car when I heard Giulio greet joyfully, "Signor Bargero! *Buon giorno*!"

A tall man standing in the back of the car looked at him with surprise and, as he

recognized Giulio, his face illuminated with a happy smile and he responded warmly, “Signor Verro! *Buon giorno!* When have you returned home?"

Giulio made his way closer to Signor Bargero and I saw them shaking hands and engaging in a lively conversation. I slowly made my way toward the back exit and reached them just before our streetcar was to make a stop on the corner of Corso Novara and Corso Palermo, where Signor Bargero and we had to get off. We waved good-by to Derna, who was getting off on the next stop.

Giulio and Signor Bargero helped Signora Bacci and me to get down the steps. Giulio introduced us to his teacher and friend and said to me that we were invited this Saturday for a visit in his home. I had the chance only to say *Grazie*, because Signor Bargero saluted us and excused himself for leaving right away, because he had to rush home for lunch.

As we climbed the four flights of stairs of our apartment building, Giulio explained that Signor Bargero was his former teacher of radio equipment and that he also had recommended him for the job at STIPEL Telephone Company.

“He must like you very much,” commented Signora Bacci, “to invite you for a visit in his home.”

“Yes,” responded Giulio, “we respect each other very much.”

When we reached the landing on our floor, we thanked Signora Bacci once more and she hurried into her apartment hoping that her husband hadn’t arrived yet for lunch.

Babbo was already home eating his lunch and Giulio told him and Mamma what we had done that morning, about his encounter with Signor Bargero, and the invitation to visit him. Both Babbo and Mamma were very pleased to hear the news.

Babbo commented, “I am glad that I send you to our company’s lawyer; he had given you the right advice.”

Mamma suggested, “It is good to keep contact with Signor Bargero, you never know how he could help you in the future.”

When Babbo was gone back to work and we were helping Mamma with the dishes, Giulio informed her about the food subsidy for me. He was right, she indeed became excited at this news and asked what kind of food they would give me.

“We don’t know it yet,” calmed her Giulio. “Tomorrow morning we shall go for registration and will find out what the Americans are giving away.”

Before starting to mop the kitchen floor, Giulio told his mother, “This morning Lala was too long on her feet and her legs need some rest. Would you allow her to lie down for a while on the couch?” I saw Mamma looking at her son in disbelief that he dared to ask her for such exception from the strict rule.

“Giulio,” she answered sternly, “you know well that it was always forbidden in our house to sit on the couch and you are asking to allow her to lie down.”

Giulio put his arm around Mother’s shoulders and said in a reconciliatory voice, “Mamma, before you never had the pregnant daughter-in-law living in your house.” And without waiting for her consent, he told me to remove my shoes and to lie down on the couch to rest.

After the kitchen floor was dry, both he and Mamma sat on the chairs on the opposite sides of the couch and put their heads on their folded arms placed on the high couch sides. They rested for about half-an-hour and then went to visit Giulio’s grandmother at the Cottolengo hospital.

I remained at home, and since the kitchen table was free and the pressing irons made of heavy cast iron were nice and hot on the cast iron stove top, I decided to use this time to iron some of my clothing that was wrinkled from remaining in the suitcase for several weeks. I couldn't iron it all, because there was not much space in the wooden wardrobe to hang it. I would have liked to iron some of Giulio's shirts, but I didn't know where his mother was keeping them and she didn't allow me yet to iron them or any other items of Giulio's clothing. Either she didn't trust me to do a good job of ironing them, or she wanted to show her son that he still needed his mother.

When I mentioned this to Giulio, he told me, "Don't be so sensitive. I just came home after a long absence and she is mothering me a little. Besides, she did this for me before and it is natural for her to do it now. You will have plenty of time to do it for the rest of our life together."

The news about Giulio's grandmother's health was not good. She indeed had the broken hip and a stroke. She didn't recognize them and was moaning from the great pain of the hip fracture. In that condition and at her age doctors were not intending to operate and repair her bones. This meant that she had to stay in bed and wait to see if nature would heal it, a slim possibility. Anyway, she was accepted now in the Cotolengo Hospital and eventually should be transferred to the Charitable Department of that Institution as a *nullatenente*,[3] elderly, sick, and handicapped.

This was a relief for her daughter and son, who couldn't afford to take her to live with their families in their one-room-and-a-kitchen apartments when their mother was healthy. Now that she was seriously sick, this was completely out of the question.

At some point, as Giulio and his mother were discussing about Grandmother, she made a comment, "It was a destiny that resolved our problem of what to do with my mother. She was ordered by the authorities to leave her son's apartment at the former Fascist Club; and at Cottolengo they would have made her wait for a long time before admitting her if she was only elderly and not sick."

"Poor Nonna," replied Giulio with a deep sigh, "what a tragic solution to her problem..."

After supper Mamma and I, as usual, were mending socks and the conversation between Babbo, Mamma, and Giulio was dominated by the problem of her mother, Cottolengo, and the destiny of the poor elderly people in the city of Turin. Babbo talked about Cotolengo as a normal solution for the "poor old folks" and he cited the examples from his side of the family. "My mother finished her last days and died in Cotolengo. So did my aunt Margarita, who had lots of money during her life. But it was her misfortune that her children depleted all her savings; they all lived very well and had their own businesses, which they started with their mother's money and constantly borrowed more and more from her. When she became elderly and frail, they placed her in Cotolengo."

After a short pause Babbo looked at Giulio and, with the wise expression on his face, added, "You should not be sad about your grandmother being placed in Cotolengo. In her condition it is the best place to finish her days. It is well known that Cotolengo nuns are taking very good care of the sick and the elderly. And it is a tradition here in Turin that all famous Professors[4] and good doctors volunteer regularly to serve the poor in Cotolengo Hospital. You should be glad that she is there. Neither your mother nor her brother could provide her with such care. They don't have the money to pay for the

doctors and medicines and don't have the place to keep her in these small apartments."

"Maybe you are right Babbo," agreed Giulio. "But it is so sad to see her there alone among the strangers."

And Babbo wisely concluded, "One day, probably, all of us will finish in that institution. Those are the facts of life for the poor folks like us. We cannot afford even to dream to be placed in the expensive institutions where the rich place their elderly."

Babbo reflected for a while, smiled and, triumphantly, with obvious conviction, presented a possible solution to this problem in the future, "Giulio, vote for the Communist Party in the coming elections. When we, the Communists, will have the power to govern, we would give equal rights for all the elderly and sick to be in good institutions, like they have it in the Soviet Union."

"Oh, Babbo," replied Giulio with the touch of weariness in his voice, "you take every occasion to try to convince me to vote for the Communists. What do you know about how the sick and the elderly are taken care in the Soviet Union?"

"I read about it in the '*Unita*,'" answered Babbo raising his voice, "and I saw also the pictures showing how the old folks are provided there!"

"Do you believe everything that is written in the 'Unita'?" Giulio asked with irony in his voice.

"Why should they lie about it?!" asked Babbo angrily.

Mamma felt that father and son were on the brink of a political collision and interrupted their discussion by saying calmly, "Giulio, it's becoming cold in the kitchen. Go and look and put a piece of wood the stove before the flame extinguishes itself."

Giulio got her message that it was time to stop the discussion with his father. He got up and busied himself reviving the fire in the stove. And he didn't answer his father's question, therefore terminating the discussion.

Later that evening when his parents went to bed, Giulio told me, "During those years that I lived far from home, I forgot that it is useless to argue with my father when he believes that he is right." And he asked me, "Did I ever tell you the story about my father's insisting that the moon is bigger than the sun?"

"Yes, I remember it. You told me when we were in Laband."

"I could never forget that incident," continued Giulio. "It was for the first time that I had the proof that I was right. I realized then that I could not trust any more opinions of my father."

"I don't understand much when you are discussing with your father," I remarked. "But I can hear that he speaks to you with much authority about politics."

"It is hard for me now to agree with him as I did before when I was living at home. He cannot accept that I have my own opinion about politics. Well, my mother is always there to stop us from going too far in our discussions."

"Yes," I agreed, "she knows well her husband and his character."

"Now, you go to bed," said Giulio, "because tomorrow morning I will wake you up early. Remember, we need to register you for food subsidy."

On Tuesday, October 23, early in the morning, Giulio and I took the streetcar to Palazzo Reale where registration for the food subsidy from UNRRA was held. We thought that we would be among the first to arrive there, but we were wrong. There were already so many people in line that Giulio almost decided to give up and not wait. But I convinced him that it was better to wait and to register now than to do it after the baby

was born, when we would need this food. But he was right, that day our turn didn't come before they closed the registration office.

Therefore, on Wednesday we went even earlier and stayed in line until they finally registered me early in the afternoon.

They didn't ask for any documents, only my name, address, and when we expected the baby to be born. I received an UNRRA card and was directed to the distribution place, where they gave me one package each of dry milk and sugar and I was told to come there once a week to re¬ceive free food.

Of course, Mamma was very impressed with the sugar, but was somewhat suspicious about the dry milk. However, Giulio and I diluted it to the right proportion and with some reluc¬tance she agreed that it was drinkable. Even Babbo, who never did drink milk because he felt it didn't mix well in his stomach with the wine, tasted it and said, "It is consumable." And pointing at me added authoritatively, "It shall help her to make mother's milk for the baby."

However, Babbo didn't lose the opportunity to criticize the Americans, "Those American capitalists are trying to bribe the poor people with the free food as propaganda to make them vote for the King and for *Partito Democristiano."*[5]

Giulio couldn't stop himself from asking his father, "Why the Soviet Union does not send here some food, instead of financing communist propaganda?"

This time Babbo answered without anger, "What a stupid question! Because they don't have anything to eat themselves. The Germans have destroyed their fields." Giulio dropped the argument. This time he felt that maybe his father was not completely wrong.

On Thursday we went for another visit to the doctor, who confirmed that everything was going well and that we didn't need to see him any more, but that in about two-and-half weeks, when I felt the first childbirth pains, Giulio should immediately bring me to the hospital. As we left the doctor's office Giulio said, "I hope we could make on time with our marriage registration before the baby arrives. Tomorrow I shall go again in the Town Hall to find out when they have scheduled our marriage registration appointment."

On Friday, the clerk in the Town Hall told Giulio that our application for marriage was reviewed and all our papers were in order and that the registration was scheduled on November 6 in the morning. Giulio was very worried, "Could you make it to wait that long?" he asked me. Then he added with consolation, "Well, at least we have now a definite date. We should notify Derna, Signora Bacci, and Domenico to be available on that date."

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1. UNRRA - acronym for United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration.
2. Royal Palace [in Italian].
3. Person without property.
4. A title of a Chief Medical Doctor in the Italian hospitals.
5. The Christian Democrats Party.

Chapter 39

A Visit To Signor Bargero

By Olga Gladky Verro
Also as Remembered by Giulio Verro

On Saturday, October 27, in the afternoon we went to visit Signor Bargero. He lived at the Barriera di Milano, on one of the streets crossing Corso Novara beyond Corso Palermo, in the direction of the Mount of Superga[1] and the hills on the outskirts of Turin. They lived in a better neighborhood that dated to the early nineteen hundreds. The apartment houses there were built for the upper class, but that had changed to mostly middle class families that could afford the rents. The three-story buildings had a distinct and somewhat ornate architectural style, large windows, balconies, and separate entrances for each staircase. Bargero's lived on the second floor. As we climbed the stairs I noticed that the hall and the staircase were neat and clean.

Signora and Signor Bargero and their teenage daughter Elsa greeted us warmly, almost as we were their relatives. Signor Bargero introduced us to his wife and daughter. I was impressed that even though he had been Giulio's teacher, he didn't call him by his first name, but introduced us and spoke to us as Signor Verro and Signora Verro. Signora Bargero asked us to remove our coats and Elsa put them on a coat rack in the entrance hall.

Signora invited us into a very large living room. I was immediately impressed with what I saw. Compared to furnishings of Giulio's relatives, Bargeros had better quality furniture. On one end of the room was an upholstered sofa and chairs with a nearby table lamp for reading. Opposite that was a dining table, several chairs, and a buffet; wooden furniture had carved ornamentation enhanced by light sheen. Especially, I noticed that they had area rugs on the floor.

> On the other end of the room there was a large bookcase full of books displaying colorful book covers. Nearby was a small desk with a desk lamp; several books and a few piles of papers indicated that it was used recently. Lace curtains and draperies adorned the two large windows where several live plants enjoyed sunlight. A modest size chandelier and the pictures on the walls added to the comfortable but unpretentious lived-in atmosphere. But compared to the apartments of Giulio's relatives that I had visited, it looked luxurious to me.

Signora Bargero invited us to sit down on the sofa and they accommodated around us on the comfortable upholstered chairs.

"Tell us what is going on in Europe after the war," Signor Bargero asked immediately.

"And how you lived in Germany during the war," seconded his wife. And Elsa was interested to know how Giulio and I met.

Fortunately, both husband and wife spoke some French and Signora used to be a German teacher when they lived for several years in Switzerland. This kept me actively involved in the conversation that spontaneously switched back and forth from Italian to French and sometimes to German.

Their daughter Elsa, who was studying in the Scientific Lyceum, as it was called, the secondary school with science curriculum, was a very smart young girl and had many questions of her own about the war, postwar situation in Europe, and about life in the Soviet Union. The whole family was definitely not sympathetic to the communist ideology and I felt comfortable to express my true feelings about the Soviet regime and the latest experiences with the Soviets during their occupation of Poland.

I was so much involved in conversation and the exchange of ideas with our hosts that I felt an immediate intellectual affinity with the three of them.

During that visit I didn't have a chance to observe much their physical appearance. The only thing I noticed at that time was that Signor Bargero was tall and well-built, and, compared to him, his wife was short and smaller in size, while their teenage daughter was much taller then her mother and already well-built as her father.

After a while Signora Bargero said, "We are so busy talking that I forgot to make a coffee." She got up and went in the kitchen while Elsa put the tablecloth on the table and invited us to sit around it. As in all other places where we were offered the chicory coffee, here it was also served without sugar, but Signora prepared homemade cookies as refreshments. As we were sipping coffee, our hosts had more and more questions and we couldn't answer them all by the time it was beginning to become dark outside and we had to go home because it was suppertime.

Signora Bargero concluded, "It is impossible in one afternoon to recount to us all that we are curious to know. You should come and visit us again very soon."

"I don't know how soon we could come," answered Giulio. "As you can see, my wife should be soon going to the hospital. We are expecting a baby in about a couple of weeks."

Signora asked me if we already had a crib for the baby, and when I told her that we didn't have it yet, she offered to lend us Elsa's child's bed with the mattress, and she led us to the storage room to show it to us. It was a beautiful bed with sides that could be lowered and the child could sleep in it up to three, or even four years of age. We were so happy that we didn't have the words to express our gratitude for her offer. Giulio told her that he would come next Saturday with his brother so they could carry it together to our apartment.

As we were saluting them and thanking them for their hospitality, both Signora and Signor Bargero said that they enjoyed our company and were grateful for such an interesting afternoon. They sincerely invited us to visit them again; and we promised them to come after the baby was born.

On our way home I said to Giulio, "What a wonderful family the Bargero's are! I hope we could really visit them again."

"Of course, we shall visit them!" answered Giulio. "We promised it."

It became dark quickly and the streets were not well lit, being still on a war-restricted illumination. We were walking fast arm-in-arm and Giulio was holding me tight to be sure that in my condition I walked safely.

When we came home, Mamma was already setting the table. She greeted us with a humorous phrase, "I thought that they invited you to stay for a supper. What did you do there all afternoon?"

"We had a wonderful time, Mamma," said Giulio. "They are such a nice family. And they invited us to come again."

"That's good," she nodded her head with approval, "I told you that you should keep in touch with Signor Bargero. He has connections. You never know, but he may be useful one day."

"They helped us already, Mamma," replied Giulio. "They are lending us for our baby their daughter's child bed with the mattress. I think that it shall fit right next to your bed on the side where Lala is sleeping."

"It is wonderful!" she exclaimed.

And we all went in the bedroom to see if there was enough room to put it there.

When we returned to the kitchen, she told us, "While you were out, I went to visit my mother at Cotolengo and she is not improving; in fact, she was much worse then the last week. She didn't recognize me and couldn't talk. I am afraid that she would not live long. But the nuns are taking good care of her. She was clean and even her hair was combed."

"Yes," agreed Giulio, "that is bad news about Grandmother's health. I am sorry, Mamma, but at this point there is nothing that could be done to heal her."

At that moment Domenico arrived and Mamma commented, "Look who is here! Are you staying after supper, just for change? Where have you been the whole afternoon?" And without waiting for his answer continued, "Grandmother's health is very bad. You should have been visiting her with me, instead of wasting your time with 'that girl' whom you cannot marry!"

"Mamma, don't start it again, maligning her," answered Domenico calmly but sternly.

Giulio right away began telling his brother about our visit to the Bargero family and kept the situation from developing into a quarrel. But both Mamma and Domenico remained tense through suppertime. To escape an unpleasant evening Domenico went out immediately after supper.

"You see, you see, he went out again!" complained Mamma to Giulio.

"Mamma," answered gently Giulio, "you should not be nagging him all the time. He is not a child any more. Let him live his own life. He is young and needs company."

"Your mother still believes that, if she nags him, he would go back to his wife," commented Babbo. "I gave up long time ago about this matter. He married her only because she insisted on it. Domenico wanted only to recognize that the child was his. But your mother insisted that he marries Bianca. Now she has to get used to the results of pushing him into a marriage."

> Later, when his parents went to bed Giulio explained to me in French why they had this heated discussion, "My mother is very persistent and it's very hard for her to recognize that Domenico's marriage was a mistake right from the start. Domenico told me that Mamma was partially responsible that his marriage failed. After he was married, she constantly criticized Bianca for being a vain and spoiled girl; said she was not able of doing anything at home and that her mother did everything for her; that she was not able to clean the house, cook, sew, or mend. Bianca was very young, only sixteen-years-old, but my mother expected her to be an experienced housewife to satisfy her ambition to have a 'good wife' for her son." Giulio gestured with his hands, indicating that there was nothing to do about it now.

After a short pause Giulio added, "But Domenico said that Bianca was also responsible for the failure of their marriage. She liked expensive things and constantly reproached him for not being able to provide for all her whims, until he couldn't stand it anymore. He said 'It began from the moment we exited the church after our wedding when she called me *balengo*[2] for not providing a carriage to bring us home from the

church, which was only a block from the house!'"

Giulio looked at me and said, "That's why I want you to try to show my mother that you will be a good wife for me, so she could not find anything to criticize you."

"I am trying, Giulio," I replied, "but she is watching everything I do and corrects me if she doesn't like how I am doing it. It is hard to hear it the whole day for all kind of small really unimportant things."

"It's all right, be patient with her, so she will see that you are trying to make things her way. She means no harm, that's her Tuscan[3] stubborn character. You will get used to it."

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1. The name of the highest hill on the outskirts of Turin.
2. Stupid - in Piedmontaise dialect.
3. From the region of Tuscany in the central Italy.

Chapter 40

Giulio’s Cousin Mario Cortopassi

By Olga Gladky Verro
Also as Remembered by Giulio Verro

It was time to make a visit to Giulio’s cousin Mario Cortopassi[1] to ask him if he would accept to be a godfather for our child. On Sunday afternoon, October 28, the three of us, Mamma, Giulio and I, went to visit him. He lived far from us and we had to take one streetcar and then walk to another street and to wait there to take another one. I said, “No wonder we didn’t visit him right away, as we did with your other relatives.”

During our long journey there Giulio told me a little about his cousin. Mario Cortopassi was Mamma’s first cousin as were his brother Oberto, his wife Derna, and another cousin Dina whom we met before. Mario was smarter then his brother. They both worked at the same factory of Villar Perosa. But, while his brother remained only a machine operator, Mario quickly became a shift supervisor. This gave him a better pay and a superior rank at the factory.

According to what Mamma recounted, Mario’s and Oberto’s father, Amerigo Cortopassi[2] immigrated to the United States in the first decade of the 1900’s, while his wife, Fiora Franchini[3] Cortopassi, the sister of Giulio’s grandfather Giuseppe Franchini,[4] remained in Asciano raising two sons. With the money her husband sent her she purchased in a village a small wine shop and earned her living and raised her two sons. Mario’s father had not come back from America but his mother joined him in Chicago after her two sons got married.

On the advice of his mother, Mario married Iris Bertini,[5] whose father had some property in the village and had only two daughters who could inherit it. Iris was a good-looking young woman, but she was considered to be somewhat irresponsible in her behavior. Mario’s mother believed that this trait would be corrected under the guidance of her son, while he eventually would inherit her property. Iris’ father was more then happy to place his daughter in the hands of Mario and he also hoped that her husband would straighten her out. Therefore, both parents were satis¬fied with this marriage. Mario and Iris had a daughter Fiorina.

But soon after they moved to Turin, Mario found out that Iris didn’t improve her behavior after marriage, that she was indeed an irresponsible wife and mother. He couldn’t tolerate her behavior and sent her back to her father in the village but kept his daughter Fiorina. His sister-in-law Derna, who didn’t have children of her own and who was the girl’s godmother, took care of her from that time on until now.

Mario couldn’t remarry because at that time in Italy law did not allow divorce; and under the strong influence of the Catholic dogma the law continued after WW II. According to what Mamma told Giulio, Mario had recently found a companion, a very nice woman, Maria, a former military nurse. More recently she had worked at the Villar Perosa factory dispensary, where Mario met her. Mario and Maria lived together, maybe

in sin, according to the custom and Catholic Church rules, but at least he had a woman to share his life, especially now with his daughter becoming of age and beginning to look for a husband.

As we walked from the streetcar stop, I saw that Mario lived in a nice, newer white-collar class neighborhood. Giulio told me that these multi-story apartment houses were built during the Mussolini period. The facades of the buildings were plain, but there were separate entrances to the staircases and they were kept neat and clean.

Mario and Maria were expecting us, but it didn't diminish the joy on Mario's face when he saw Giulio. They embraced warmly and only then did Mario present Maria to us as his companion, and Giulio presented to them me as his wife. Mamma and Maria already knew each other.

I noticed that although these apartments were built in more recent times, they were economy construction. All rooms were smaller then in older buildings; however, the apartments had a small bathroom, an entrance hall, two bedrooms and the kitchen. As with others of Giulio's relatives that we visited, we were invited into the kitchen, the center of family life. And, as a symbol of hospitality, Maria, of course, offered us the chicory coffee without sugar. Those were the hard times immediately after the war and no one was ashamed of not serving sugar with the coffee.

Mario's brother Oberto, who worked at the same factory, had already informed him that Giulio returned from Germany married to a Russian girl, and therefore they didn't expect me to talk Italian, except for a few conventional phrases in saluting, thanking, and saying that something was good or pleasing. But by this time I had already learned many words and expressions in Italian and was myself surprised how much I understood the conversations that were going on between Mamma and Maria and between Giulio and Mario.

As usual, not being involved directly in conversation, I had plenty of time to observe. Mario was older then his brother Oberto, but he was shorter and smaller overall in size. He did not resemble his brother behavior either. While Oberto was loud, Mario was soft-spoken and had more refined manners.

Maria was taller and more slender then Mario. I think that she was about his age. As a nurse she was obviously used to professional contact with people and it did show in how she behaved with us, tactfully, but dignified in voice and demeanor. She asked Mamma how soon I expected the baby and reassured me, speaking as a nurse in a doctor's office—that in Italy hospitals and midwives were very good and I could expect good care of my baby and me.

On that occasion Mamma reminded her son, "Giulio, don't forget what Derna suggested you to ask Mario about."

"What she suggested?" asked Mario with curiosity.

Giulio got up, came close to me and replied to Mario, "Well, Derna agreed to be a godmother to our baby and she suggested asking you to be a godfather. Do you think that you can do a favor and accept such a responsibility?"

Mario looked at Maria, as if he was asking her opinion. She smiled and nodded al¬most imperceptibly. Mario then replied, "I am honored by your re¬quest. Of course, I accept it."

I understood what was said and replied in Italian, "*Grazie*, Mario."

Giulio also expressed his gratitude. Mamma was all smiles, she liked it that

Mario accepted Giulio's request.

Then Mamma got engaged with Maria talking about her mother being sick and asking her professional opinion. I was amazed with what patience Maria was explaining to her something about the stroke and also about the broken hip.

Mario, of course, was asking Giulio about his life in the prisoners of war camp in Germany; the situation in Europe after the war; and they discussed the political future of Italy. From the fragments that I was able to understand in their conversation, I concluded that Mario didn't have communist ideas and was leaning to vote for the Christian Democrats Party, and he preferred to vote for Italy to become a Democratic Republic with the elected president, rather than to remain the Kingdom of Italy and having a King. I understood that Giulio was in agreement with Mario in political views and that he leaned in that direction to vote, rather then on his father's and brother's side.

As we were saying good-bye to our hosts, Mario reminded us, "You would let me know when the baby will be born." Giulio reassured him that he will notify Derna and his brother Oberto will tell him at work. We departed from their home very happy with our visit. Mamma especially was satisfied that her grandchild should have a nice godfather who could also afford to make good gifts.

On Monday Giulio and I went to the Palazzo Reale to receive the free food from UNRRA. Because he was starting his work at the STIPEL the next week on Thursday, I would have to go there all by myself, so Giulio was teaching me how to watch for the right streetcar stop and how to get from it to Palazzo Reale. We had to wait in line for some time, but it was not as long as when we had to register.

When we returned home, Mamma already finished washing clothes and was hanging them on the wire lines extending from the balcony in front of the apartment.

During the two weeks we lived with Giulio's parents I got used to the daily family routine. Each day was a virtual repetition of the previous day, though with small variations on some days of the week, such as Monday was a washday, and Tuesday was ironing and mending day. This predictability of what had to be done every day and each part of the day made it easy to adapt to the routine, but it didn't leave me time to do things for myself. I had to ask Giulio to explain to Mamma that sometimes, instead of mending in the evening, I wanted to write a letter to my mother. And, if I felt tired, I didn't dare to go to bed early, because I felt not at ease to ask her to get the bed ready for me, the task she did nightly before she and Babbo retired.

In the evening when Giulio and I were alone in the kitchen, we constantly talked about when we could have a place of our own. Slowly it was becoming clear that the idea of finding an apartment for us in the near future was impossible.

There were several negative factors to consider. First, after the war there was a shortage of apartments in the city and it was almost impossible to find even an attic room to rent. Second, assuming that we found one, we didn't have the money to buy even a mattress to put on the floor to sleep. And third, the baby needed a warm place during the winter and wood was very expensive and hard to find. We had to resign ourselves to remain living with Giulio's parents at least until spring. But the biggest problem was that we wouldn't save any money because Giulio had decided he would give all his wages to his mother as he always had. And I couldn't even complain about it.

Giulio consoled me, "My dearest Lala, the important thing is that we are together." And on this point I agreed.

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1. The “Franchini’s Family Tree,” Foglio No.6.
2. Ibid, Foglio No. 6.
3. Ibid, Foglios No. 1 and No. 6.
4. See the chapter “Giulio’s Ancestors Lived In the Village Of Asciano.”
5. The “Franchini’s Family Tree,” Foglio No. 2, Bertini’s ancestors.

Chapter 41

Marriage Registration

By Olga Gladky Verro
Also as Remembered by Giulio Verro

On Thursday, November 1, 1945, Giulio started his work at the STIPEL telephone company. He woke me up before leaving for work and reminded me to try helping Mamma in her daily chores without being upset when she teaches me her way of doing things. I wished him good luck on the job. He came home for lunch at noon, at the same time as Babbo, and they returned back to be at work by two o'clock.

In the beginning Giulio was assigned to work with another worker to install the new telephones in the homes at the designated section of the city. They had to take the streetcar to the nearest streetcar stop and to walk from there to the residences where they were scheduled to work that day. Sometimes it took long time to reach them and they were able to serve only two to three new customers a day. Giulio said that the hardest thing was to carry his heavy tool bag, but the job was not difficult and he enjoyed meeting people. Giulio said that most important for him was to feel secure that he could provide for us and not be a financial burden to his parents.

On Saturday, November 3, he worked only a half day and when he returned home he proudly handed to his mother an envelope with his first earned wages and said, "Mamma, here are my wages for the half-week that I worked." Then, almost apologetically, he corrected, "I kept part of the money for the streetcar tickets for myself and for everybody who will be coming next Tuesday to the Town Hall for our marriage registration and for the registration excise tax."

As Mamma was counting the money, Giulio added reassuringly, "Next Saturday it will be more money, because I will have the wages for the whole week, less one day on Tuesday that I asked to have off for our marriage registration."

On Sunday afternoon Giulio, Domenico, and Mamma went to visit Grandmother at Cotolengo. Babbo was working, and I remained alone in the apartment and again used this time to wash my hair and to bathe in the small tub. This was much better than doing it in the evening when I had to hurry between the time Mamma and Babbo went to bed and before Domenico arrived home. This time I didn't have to rush and enjoyed a relaxed bath.

By the time they returned home, I was already writing a letter to my mother. I wanted to mail another letter, because I was not sure that the international mail was going regularly yet, and was hoping that maybe one of the letters would get to its destination. I also suspected that the Soviets had established censorship and this could retard the arrival of the letters. Giulio's mother couldn't understand why I was writing another letter to my mother, when I hadn't received an answer to the one I had already mailed.

Giulio told me that his grandmother was not improving; in fact, her health was

worsening, because her hip was not healing and she could not be lifted to the sitting position. She was not able to feed herself and the nuns had to feed her. It was becoming clear that she would die very soon. Mamma was anxious about the cost of the funeral and who would pay for it, since the institution had taken all of her mother's possessions. She asked the nuns about it and was informed that Cottolengo makes all the arrangements and pays the expenses for the funeral of the poor in their care. This meant that Mamma, her sister, and her brother would not bear the burden of paying for the funeral.

Mamma said with relief, "In this sad incident with my mother, the only right thing my brother did was placing her in Cotolengo. Could you imagine if we had to take care of it all?"

Monday was a washday and Mamma did the washing. She allowed me only to hang the clothes on the wires off the balcony and I helped her in preparing lunch and set the table. By this time I was able to understand most of the common words and sentences used in the daily routine and had no difficulty in following what she wanted me to do.

It was a pleasant break to the daily routine from twelve to two o'clock when Giulio was coming home for lunch and I could see him and talk with him. He always inquired what new words I learned that day and showed his appreciation of my quick learning of Italian.

Monday evening Giulio arranged with Signora Bacci and Derna the time to take the streetcar; and Domenico said that he would come from work directly to the Town Hall.

Tuesday, November 6, 1945 was a special day for Giulio and me. He woke me up early in the morning to get ready and said, "Dearest Lala, finally we reached the day that we would become legally married. How long we searched for it!"

"And the baby has given us time to do it," I added.

And Giulio had expressed his wish, "Let's hope that he will be patient for a few more hours until we sign the certificate of marriage." Then he cautiously asked, "Are you feeling well this morning?"

"Perfect," I replied. "You don't have to worry, it will not happen today."

I put my best dress, combed my freshly washed hair that I set the night before, put on my coat and hat; Giulio also wore his best suit and coat, and Mamma her Sunday outfit.

> We met Signora Bacci at the landing near her apartment, and Derna was waiting for us on the streetcar stop near our house. We all boarded the streetcar. At the Town Hall's waiting room Domenico was already waiting for us with a small bouquet of flowers, which he presented to me with a ceremonious gesture and said, "These flowers are for the bride." It was a really nice gesture on his part, which even Giulio hadn't expected from his brother.

The ceremony was very simple. The employee called Giulio's and my names and we all entered the office. He checked our identity cards. Then he told the three witnesses to come to the desk and asked us if we were entering in this matrimonial contract voluntarily. We answered, "Yes." Then he asked us to sign the Certificate of Marriage, and the witnesses to sign underneath. Giulio paid the excise tax and the employee placed the seal and signed the certificate. As he was giving us our Certificate Of Marriage, he congratulated us. Giulio kissed me and all our witnesses kissed us, congratulated, and wished us good luck.

Only then did we see Babbo, who came while we were busy with the paperwork. Babbo also congratulated us and then invited all of us to a café where he offered to all a glass of Vermouth wine to celebrate the event. Giulio and I expressed our appreciation to the witnesses for their favor of taking time to come this morning and we also thanked Babbo for the treat at the café. Everybody was in a good and happy mood as we boarded the streetcar where we chatted cheerfully until we reached our destination.

We saluted Derna before getting out at our stop and promised to let her know as soon as the baby was born. We said good-bye to Signora Bacci at the stairs landing and thanked her again for her kindness. We quickly set the table while Mamma warmed up the simple lunch without anything special, but for change, she didn't annoy Domenico with her preaching. And the happy mood prevailed through the whole lunchtime. This completed our marriage ceremony.

Domenico and Babbo returned to work, but Giulio remained home for the rest of the day, and after helping Mamma with the usual chores, the three of us took a rest.

In the afternoon both Giulio and I wrote letters to my mother describing in French our simple civil marriage ceremony. Giulio concluded his letter[1] to her with reassurance, "Dear *Maman*, now that we are legally married, you should not worry any more about Lala's and baby's future. According to the Italian law, beginning today, Lala became an Italian citizen. This means that she shall have all the rights and protections under the Italian laws. I hope that now you may be reassured that she is safe from 'our cousins'[2] and they cannot order her anymore to return 'home.'"

After reading this paragraph, I said to Giulio, "You stated it so clear and cleverly that, if 'our cousins' are censuring the mail, they would never suspect anything."

"Let's just hope," he replied, "that this letter will reach Mama and give her piece of mind. Until now we don't have any answer from her and we already mailed several letters. Probably, the Soviets do not allow yet the international mail to Poland from the countries that are not under Soviet occupation."

"Maybe," I also guessed, "we are writing to the Rufin's address and it is very possible that for some reason she is not living there."

"It's possible," replied Giulio, "but she knows we write to his address, therefore she should go there to get her letters."

I thought about the worst scenario, and said, "Maybe she didn't move on time to Rufin's home and the NKVD caught her and deported her back home."

"Don't start with your pessimistic ideas," Giulio warned. "In any case, Rufin should write to us what he knows about your mother."

Our animated discussion in French annoyed Mamma. I had seen on other occasions that when Giulio and I spoke French, she was very uncomfortable because she couldn't understand what we were talking about. This time she looked at us with suspicion, as if we were conspirators talking about something we didn't want her to know. Finally, she couldn't resist longer and reproached her son, "Giulio, why are you talking in that foreign language? Talk with her in Italian, otherwise she will never learn it."

"Don't worry Mamma," Giulio replied reassuringly, "she will learn to speak Italian in no time at all."

Mamma made a grimace shaking her head to express her discontent.

"Giulio," I said, "she wants to know what we are talking about. Make a short translation for her and you will see that it will calm her down."

Giulio agreed and explained to her, "Mamma, we are trying to guess why we are not receiving letters from Lala's mother. It is easier for us to understand each other if we speak French, because Lala

doesn't know yet all the words in Italian."

With relief she answered, "Why didn't you tell me this right away? I heard that Lala was complaining and both of you said 'mamma' so many times. I thought that she was making fuss about something that I had done."

"No, Mamma, we were talking about Lala's mother," explained Giulio. "Yes, she was complaining, but not about you, it was about the international mail that doesn't work yet well."

"Isn't she very suspicious?" I asked Giulio.

"Well," he justified her, "she understood one word and imagined the rest."

The remaining days of the week went by in the established routine. The three men went to work; I helped Mamma to put the apartment in order, and we went to the market and to the shops to buy vegetables, fruits, bread, and wine. I helped her to prepare the meals, and Giulio and Babbo came home for lunch.

After they were gone, we cleaned the kitchen, washed the floor, and Mamma rested while I quietly did some minor chores. I made sheets for the baby's bed from the big sheets I brought from Poland. I also prepared a small bag with baby clothes and my nightgown, robe, and personal items to have it ready to go to the hospital.

In the afternoon there was always something to iron for the men or for us. Then it was time to prepare the evening meal and set the table before the men returned from work. The supper and the evening were also the same every day; however, Giulio was pitching in helping to clear the table. Babbo, as usual, discussed authoritatively with Giulio about politics. And Domenico was going out and returning late in the evening, giving to Giulio and me some time to remain alone after parents went to bed.

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1. Giulio's letter to his mother-in-law, Antonina G Berezhnaya Gladky, November 6, 1945.
2. Before departing from Poland we agreed to call the Soviets "our cousins" in our letters.

Chapter 42

Birth of Our Daughter Lia

By Olga Gladky Verro
Also as Remembered by Giulio Verro

We were in the process of revising the name that we should give to our baby. We had long time agreed to the name Lia, if it was a girl. For a boy's name we had a conflict. Giulio wanted the name Alfio, and that sounded harmonious to me. But after he told me the story of Alfio from the opera "Cavalleria Rusticana," I absolutely refused to give my son this name. Thus until the last moment we had not decided on a name for a boy. However, we did contemplate two names, Piero and Renzo, to be chosen at the last moment.

On Sunday, November 11, Mamma and Giulio went again to visit his grandmother and I took a bath in their absence.

Before supper I felt the first cramps of labor and Giulio decided to take me immediately to the hospital, since we needed to take the streetcar on Corso Novara and then transfer to another. It took us about one hour to reach the Mulinette[1] hospital. As we traveled, the cramps were increasing in intensity and I had a hard time to keep myself from complaining. I was lucky to find a place to sit in the streetcar and Giulio was standing in front of me and holding tight my hand.

In the hospital I was admitted right away in the maternity ward and Giulio warned the nurse that I didn't speak or understand Italian well. Giulio had only time to say good-bye, give me a quick kiss, and to say he would come by to check on me early in the morning before going to work.

The nurse led me to a small room, where another young woman was in the beginning stages of labor. The midwife came and asked me a few questions and checked on the position of the baby. When she found out that I couldn't speak and understand Italian well, she was annoyed and didn't bother even to try to explain to me how to behave during the labor spasms that were very painful.

When she was gone from the room, my roommate said, "This midwife is not very friendly. I guess she is busy and has no time to fuss with you. Is this your first pregnancy?"

"Yes, my first," I replied.

"This is my second child and I know already what to do and how to behave to resist the pain. I will teach you what to do to make it easier on you." And she showed me how she was alleviating her pain and I followed her advice and it really helped.

Up to midnight the two of us were competing in moaning and screaming. The midwife was checking on us at intervals and then ordered my roommate to move to the delivery room. Before leaving, my roommate wished me good luck.

My labor pains were becoming stronger and stronger and more frequent until the next morning when Giulio came to see me and found me all exhausted and in great pain.

He was surprised that I was still waiting my turn.

"She is not ready to deliver yet," said the midwife, and reassured him, "Maybe later this morning."

Giulio promised to return during his lunchtime to see me.

Shortly before nine o'clock, the midwife ordered the aides to take me to the delivery room. The labor spasms were now frequent, very painful, and I struggled trying not to scream too loudly. The natural struggle of childbirth was complicated further because I couldn't follow the commands given to me by the midwife, who was treating me harshly because I did not understand Italian. She didn't bother to communicate in some other way; I just remembered what my roommate showed me to do, how to push and relax and in the long run it helped.

Finally! I heard the midwife announcing, "It's a girl." And I heard the baby crying.

I suddenly felt so happy that I wanted to announce proudly to the whole world, "I am the Mother of a little girl!"

One of the nurses assisting the midwife brought the baby close to my face and said, "Here she is, your daughter, Signora Verro."

I carefully touched her tiny fingers and said, "Ciao, Lia."

"Are you naming her Lia?" asked the nurse. "I need to write the baby's name."

I answered, "Yes, Lia Verro."

The nurse immediately took the baby away and I saw that she was taking care of her. Meanwhile the midwife and another nurse were finishing with my afterbirth pro¬cedure and then moved me to another room where a young doctor came to put a few stitches in a laceration that occurred in delivery.

Then the nurses' aides moved me into a huge room with many large windows. There were several long rows of beds occupied by women who had already delivered. They gave me a large cup of milk with chicory coffee and the nurse aide told me to drink it all, "You need it to make the milk for the baby." I was so exhausted, from the long night of labor pains, and from delivery that morning that I fell asleep immediately.

I woke up when Giulio kissed me on the cheek and I heard him say, "Lala, are you asleep?" I opened my eyes and smiled. "So, we have a little daughter Lia," he said, caressing my face.

The nurse brought the baby, put her on my bed and said, "I will return and help you to get started breastfeeding her."

I had only time to kiss the baby, when Giulio took Lia in his arms and kissed her tenderly on the cheek.

"Aren't you disappointed that it is not Alfio?" I asked. "How could I be disappointed?" he answered, "Didn't you see how pretty she is?" Then he added, "We have plenty of time to have Alfio later."

We admired together Lia's little hands and fingers and her tiny mouth and rosy cheeks and guessed whom she resembled most. "She looks like your mother," concluded Giulio. I was not so sure, but she looked very pretty to me.

The nurse came and helped me start nursing. I was surprised that as soon as I touched with my nipple near her mouth, she immediately began to suck. "Oh," said Giulio, "look at her, she is already hungry. *Buon appetito*, my little girl!"

Mamma came to visit me in the afternoon. She saw the baby in the nursery. She said, "I am happy to have another grand- daughter. They are prettier then boys." She

asked me if Giulio had already come to see me and if he was happy with his daughter. And she was curious what they gave me to eat. With my limited Italian we could not have a long conversation, so her visit was short.

After childbirth, women were kept in bed for the first two days and the nurses brought babies to their mothers for nursing. I was so happy that I had milk and Lia began to suck right away. Not until the third day would they allow me to sit on a chair, and to walk a little.

Giulio visited me every day during his lunchtime and was always there when the nurses brought babies for nursing. He treated our little daughter and me with such tenderness and affection that I knew he was happy. Every day he brought me oranges or mandarins to supplement my hospital diet. We admired our little daughter, who was slowly falling asleep as she was sucking my milk.

I stayed in the hospital until the next Sunday, when Giulio and Mamma came to take the baby and me home. I wanted to hold the baby, but Mamma took her from me saying that I was not strong enough to carry her walking to the streetcar. I knew that she meant well. But, when we boarded the streetcar and I found a place to sit down, she continued to hold the baby, and I felt almost jealous when she was proudly showing the baby to other passengers, as if she were her mother.

When we arrived at our streetcar stop, Giulio took Lia from his mother and carried her up the stairs to the apartment. Lia was asleep and he placed her in her little bed and left the door to the bedroom ajar.

As feeding time came and Lia began to cry, Mamma rushed into the bedroom ahead of me and ordered me, “Get the diapers. The baby needs to be changed before you start to feed her.”

While I was taking the diapers and the talcum from the bedroom, Mamma has already undressed her and placed her on the couch. I came close to her, trying to take over the task, but she didn’t move. She took the diaper from me and began to show me how it had to be folded and how it had to be put on the baby.

Giulio saw that she was not allowing me to do anything and said, “Mamma, let Lala do it.”

“I am showing her how we do it here, maybe in Russia they are doing it differently.”

“Diapers are diapers,” said Giulio, “it doesn’t matter how you put them on, as long as they stay in place.”

By this time Mamma had finished changing the baby and gave her to me saying, “Now you can feed her.”

I sat on the chair and began to nurse. Mamma stood next to me and said, “You are holding the baby wrong way,” and she began to change baby to a different position.

I said to Giulio, “The nurse in the hospital showed me to hold the baby this way while feeding. Please, tell this to your mother.”

Giulio patiently explained this to her and added, “Mamma, you have to let Lala to take care of the baby.”

“I have to show her how to do it right,” she replied, almost offended by the Giulio’s remarks. “I don’t want her to take care of ‘*my* baby girl’ in the foreign ways.”

Giulio gave up and told me, “Lala, please be patient with my mother. She means well. It is the first day that the baby is home. After, she couldn’t do it all by herself, taking

care of the baby, cooking, cleaning, washing... You should try to take over the tasks of caring for the baby slowly without upsetting her."

I didn't agree with him, but there was nothing to do but wait and see how things would be in the future. Nevertheless, I felt that she was taking my daughter from me especially, when she was calling her "*my* baby girl."

> After I finished feeding Lia, I gave her to Giulio to hold. I remembered how eager he was to hold her in the hospital and now he could enjoy her as long as he wanted. My heart was filled with joy to see him so happy with our little daughter in his arms, admiring her and caressing her. I thought, "How lucky I am to have such loving father for my daughter."

Giulio said, "She is sound asleep. I will put her in her little bed."

"Cover her well with the blanket," said Mamma, "it is not very warm there. And leave the door ajar."

When Giulio returned he said to me, "You see, Mamma means well for the baby. As far as I can remember, to save the fuel, they never kept the door to the bedroom open. And now they would need to spend more money for the wood, which is very expensive."

We were talking as usual in French and I replied to him knowing that Mamma wouldn't understand my answer, "You are saying this, as if the additional expense for heating shall come from Babbo's or Domenico's wages. But you give her all of your wages and I think you are contributing toward this expense and don't need to apologize for it."

"Well," Giulio patiently tried to explain, "I want you to be aware and to appreciate how much Mamma and Babbo are doing for us in these difficult times."

"I realize this," I agreed. "But don't you think they are doing what any parents would do for their son under similar conditions?" I reflected for a while and added, "I never emphasized what my mother was doing for us in Laband. We accepted it as a normal and expected from a mother to take care of her children."

"True," confirmed Giulio, "we never talked this way about your mother, but I appreciate all that she has done for us."

> "I am also grateful for all that your parents are doing for us. What I cannot understand is that you are pointing out every little thing that is done for us by your father, and especially by your mother, as if it is something exceptional, and not as a normal thing that could be expected from your parents."

"All right, all right," agreed Giulio, "but you should consider that the conditions in Laband were different. There your mother and we were in the same situation and helped each other in the time of need. Here we suddenly arrived in the family and they accepted us to share their roof, bed, and food, but, most of all, they had to renounce some of their own comfort to accommodate us. They are making sacrifices for our benefit and we should recognize this." And he concluded, "That's the difference."

I understood Giulio's reasoning and agreed that here the situation was different. But I couldn't agree with his supersensitive pointing to every small thing that his mother was doing for us and I was annoyed being constantly reminded about it. But now I had told him my point of view and hoped that he would also be sensitive to my feelings. Therefore, I concluded the discussion by saying, "Good, now we understand each other."

After the childbirth, according to the folk customs, Mamma didn't allow me to touch cold water for forty days. She washed clothes and baby's diapers and didn't allow

me even to wash the dishes, because rinsing was done in cold water.

Bathing the baby involved a lot of patience on my part; Mamma was constantly supervising me and correcting me, because according to her I never could hold her right. Then there was the matter of wrapping the baby in the blanket, “You wrap her in a foreign way,” she reproached me. “Here we do it this way.” And she would unwrap and redo it to show me how it should be done “The right way.”

Soon after we brought Lia from the hospital, she developed *la crosta lattea,* an insidious crusty eczema on her scalp. It was itchy and we had to make little mittens for her and cover her head with a cotton bonnet to keep her from scratching. I was convinced it was probably an infection contracted in the hospital, but pediatrician Doctor Crosetti told us that it was because she was not digesting milk well. According to him, there was nothing to do but to wait until she was weaned from milk and could eat other food. Meanwhile it was good to allow it to purge itself, and to keep the crust oiled with olive oil, and not to wash it with water, but daily remove it carefully as it became loose.

I had also another idea that some vitamins could be helpful for quicker healing and remembered that at home we used to make carrot juice to drink as a vitamin supplement. So, one day when Mamma went to the market, I shredded a carrot and squeezed the juice and poured it in a bottle that we used to give her sweetened water to pacify her when she was crying. When Lia woke up, I breastfed her for a while and then gave her the carrot juice. She liked it and began to suck it with pleasure. At that moment Mamma returned from the market.

“What are you feeding her? What is this yellow water you are giving her?” she screamed grabbing the bottle from Lia’s mouth and making her cry.

“It’s carrot juice,” I replied innocently, “In Russia all babies are given carrot juice.”

“Are you crazy? Do you want to poison ‘my little girl’?” she screamed again and poured the juice in the sink. She removed her coat and forcefully took Lia from me, trying to calm her down.

I was upset and began also to cry. Mamma couldn’t calm the baby, who was still hungry; I finally convinced her to give her to me to finish breastfeeding her. When she fell asleep I placed her in her bed and didn’t return to the kitchen, but stayed in the bedroom crying for a long time.

Before Giulio and Babbo would arrive for lunch, Mamma came in the room and accused me, “Are you trying to stay here until Giulio comes home so you can complain that his mother doesn’t treat you right? Wait until I tell him what you were feeding to his baby! Raw carrot juice! Luckily I came on time to stop you. You better come out, wash your face and set the table!”

Reluctantly I followed her orders. But when Giulio came home, Mamma was the first to complain to him about his wife’s foreign customs and how I almost poisoned his daughter.

I explained to Giulio that carrot juice was commonly given to babies in Russia and he agreed that there was nothing wrong giving it to Lia. “But you must understand,” he justified his mother’s action, “that here in Italy we have oranges and nobody gives carrot juice to babies.”

“But she should not have acted so violently, grabbing the bottle from the baby’s mouth, making her cry, and screaming at me,” I complained.

Giulio calmed me down, and switched to calming his mother, explaining to her

that I didn't do anything wrong, to which she objected most emphatically.

At that moment entered Babbo and Mamma began to complain to him about what I had done wrong. "She treats in foreign ways '*my* baby girl.' Could you imagine, she was giving her to drink raw carrot juice! Luckily I came on time to stop her."

Babbo calmly replied, "Don't exaggerate, all that raw carrot juice could have done to the baby is to give her diarrhea." And added with impatience, "Let's eat, I have to return to work on time."

That evening Giulio consoled me and promised that he would try really hard to find an apartment for us so we could bring up the baby without interference from his mother.

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1. The largest hospital in Turin located beyond Valentino City's Park along the River Po.

Part 2

Lala’s Mother Hiding in Poland

Chapter 43

Suddenly I Remained Alone

As Remembereded by Antonina G. Berezhnaya Gladky
Translated and Edited by Olga Gladky Verro

I still remember that Monday, October 1, 1945. I got up early in the morning and could hear Lala and Giulio in their bedroom talking. Suddenly I realized that today was the day that they were waiting for so long, the day that a few weeks ago seemed to be only a dream for them. Today they were departing with the Red Cross convoy train[1] repatriating the Italian prisoners of war[2] in Germany.

My feelings were mixed. As any mother, I was concentrating more on matters of her safety, while my daughter gave importance only to her sentimental feelings. But her and my goals did coincide.

She wanted to remain together with the young man she was in love with and who loved her. And they both desired that their child would grow up with a mother and a father.

I was happy that she was in love and was loved by a fine man and that now they had a good chance to remain together with my grandchild having both parents. But I was also grateful to Giulio, and to the destiny that was making it possible for my daughter and her child to escape the misfortune of being deported back to the Soviet Union, where for sure she could expect the life of hardship, sacrifice, and heavy labor, and bleak future in some concentration camp in a remote part of the country.

But the happiness about the brighter future of my daughter was mixed with the apprehension about what would happen to me once they were gone. I had, of course, the chance to find Giulio's good friend Rufin, who promised him and my daughter to give me a refuge in his home,[3] but there were too many uncertainties to be sure this could become a reality.

I was distracted from my thoughts by the practical chores. I packed for Lala and Giulio as much food as I could find in the kitchen to give them for their journey. Then I prepared a good breakfast and for perhaps the last time ever all three of us sat together at the table to eat.

Giulio was very excited and happy that he finally could go home with Lala. He caressed and kissed her several times with tenderness and affection and she kissed him back with intense fondness and devotion. I felt reassured that I was doing the right thing to entrust my daughter to him. It was more then a year that he courted her and the last nine months he lived with us. I had plenty of time to know him and to see that he loved Lala and there was no doubt that she was in love with him. I felt certain that he would make her happy and would take good care of her and of my grandchild.

When we were dressed and ready to go, I asked Lala and Giulio to sit down for a few minutes, as it was a Russian custom to do this for good luck before a journey. Although our neighbors who lived on the first floor were used to hearing us going to the market very early in the morning, I warned Lala and Giulio to walk as quietly as possible on the staircase, just in case they would become curious. We tiptoed down the stairs, so the Izsorski family would not peek from the door and become suspicious that we were departing with so much luggage. I believed that the less they knew, the better it was for all of us.

On our way to Katowitz we spoke only French, to be sure that we didn't make a mistake and speak Russian at the station before departure. There were so many things that needed to be said, but all that I could think about was to tell Lala and Giulio to write me immediately from Prague and from Italy, and when the baby was born. And Lala reminded me about contacting Rufin immediately.

At the station in Katowitz many Soviet soldiers were on the platform near the Red Cross train and one stood near each car door. To prevent suspicion, Lala and I said good-bye in French and tried to hide our emotions and tears. As Giulio kissed me good-bye he told me, "*Maman*, take good care of you." And I told him, "And you take good care of my daughter and my grandchild."

I watched with trepidation as the Red Cross man checked their documents. I worried that something could go wrong until the last moment when they boarded the train. When I saw Giulio help Lala climb the high steps into the car, I took a deep breath of relief.

After a few minutes one window opened and Lala came to the window, then another window opened and Giulio appeared in it. They waved to me and I could hear them saying in French, "*Au revoir, Maman.*"[4] I continued to repeat, "*Ecrive moi*! *Au revoir.*"[5]

It seemed to me that it was too soon after our arrival to the station, I heard the whistle of a conductor and the train began to move. Lala and Giulio were waving and I was waving back and continued

to wave long after they disappeared from my sight. Only then I saw that everybody was leaving the platform and I followed them.

When I was in the train returning to Laband and was surrounded by many people sitting next to me, in front of me, and standing in the passageway, I suddenly felt all-alone.

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1. See the chapter “Repatriation of Italian Prisoners of War.”
2. See the chapter “Italian Armistice.”
3. See the chapter “Three Thousand Zloty Solution.”
4. “Good-bye, Mama” [in French].
5. “Write to me. Good-bye” [in French].

Part 2

Lala's Mother Hiding in Poland

Chapter 44

Decisions, Decisions, Decisions…

As Remembered by Antonina G. Berezhnaya Gladky
Translated and Edited by Olga Gladky Verro

I knew that now I had to make a lot of decisions all by myself and had to act quickly if I wanted to evade deportation to the Soviet Union. I had several things that needed to be settled before I would call Giulio's friend Rufin. I decided that the first thing I had to do was to move out of the apartment, so Izsorski would not send the Polish men to force me out.

The second thing to do was to sell, or to give away to somebody, all that coal that Giulio so faithfully moved from one apartment to another. I definitely would not leave it to Izsorski after all that trouble he caused us! Then the bright idea flashed through my mind, "Maybe I could combine the two of these problems together. I probably could find somebody to take me for a short time in their home in exchange for all that coal. Why don't I try to ask about it our Polish neighbors who live in the house next to ours?"

On my return to Laband, before going to my apartment, I went straight to our Polish neighbors and offered them a bargain that they could not refuse, to let me stay for a very short time in their home in exchange for the coal that was sufficient for them for the whole winter. The neighbor came with me to the shed and checked how much coal I really had. "*Pani,*"[1] he said to me right there on the spot, "tomorrow morning get your things ready, my son and I will help you to move to our home. We have a room that you can have all for yourself. I will tell my wife to get it ready for you." I couldn't believe how easily I had solved these two problems.

The next day very early in the morning our neighbor came with his son and moved all my belongings to their house. Izsorski and his wife were surprised to see our neighbor helping me to move.

Madam Izsorski asked me, "Are you leaving?"

I gave her a short answer, "No. I am moving next door."

I think only then she realized that Lala and Giulio were not there and that I was alone. When Mister Izsorski went to work, I told my neighbor to begin immediately moving our coal from the shed to his place. He even used our cart that Giulio used to move the coal so many times.

Madam Izsorski tried to talk to me again, but I responded that I was too busy. When her husband came home for lunch he had a big surprise, most of the coal was already moved. I was sure that when he tried to evict us from our apartment he was counting that our coal would remain for him. I had my revenge for his trickery to evict us from the apartment.

Another important thing I had to do as soon as possible was to return to Lyudmila Larionovna[2] a gold coin that she gave me to barter for a gold jewelry at the jeweler in Katovitz, as I did for her several times before.[3] I had to tell her that I had moved to the house next door and that I was planning to quit going to the market.

In a few days, as soon as I settled down in my room, I decided to try to see her. I put on my brown coat that the German seamstress made for me with very deep pockets, which I asked her to make to keep secure my money on the market. I wrapped the gold coin in a small handkerchief and put it in the right pocket.

Then, I went to walk back and forth across the street from the NKVD camp fence, as I did when I wanted to see her after the new Repatriation Division arrived in the camp. After their arrival Lyudmila Larionovna became cautious and according to our latest agreement she was coming to our apartment to

retrieve her goods. At this time I needed to see her and tried for several days to walk there, hoping that she could see me from the dispensary windows and would come out. But she didn't expect me and all my efforts were without success. All this time that I was trying to see her, I kept the gold coin in my coat pocket.

Now that I was out of our apartment, the Izsorski family had the whole house for themselves and I thought that he would not send any more Polish men from the Town Hall to bother me. My landlord and his wife were treating me well, their teenage son was respectful to me, and the room was comfortable. Therefore, I didn't feel that I had to hurry in contacting Rufin.

After the hurried departure of Lala and Giulio, I was left with all our remaining possessions that we didn't sell or barter for food during the nine months that we lived under the occupation by the Soviet Army. This included what we brought with us from our home in the Ukraine, what we accumulated during more then a year-and-half of our residency in Laband under the German rule, plus many things from our neighbors' apartment that they left to us when they escaped from the advancing Soviet Army. I estimated that by selling it little by little on the market in Katowitz it could provide me with food for some time.

Since it was impossible to carry all of it on the train and on the streetcar, I had to do plenty of sorting and packing. I estimated that it would take me about two weeks to get ready. Therefore, I decided that about the middle of October would be about the right time for me to begin moving my belongings from Laband to Rufin's home. I thought that if I would do it myself and take very little luggage, as if I were going to the market, it would not raise any suspicion from my landlord and the Izsorski family. I decided that I would notify Rufin when I went to Katowitz and at that time would give him some of my luggage. Then I would make several trips taking little by little, the rest of my belongings to his home. I thought through my plan, rehearsing it in my mind several times, and it seemed to be a very reasonable, safe, and inconspicuous way of moving from Laband, since for many months my neighbors were used to see me going to the market in Katowitz.

For almost two weeks I gradually sorted and washed my clothing, lingerie, towels, and bed linen, neatly folded them and placed them in piles ready to be packed in the suitcases. My suit and the two coats I left hanging on the coat rack to keep them from wrinkling.

In the evening, on October 13, I finally finished with this long task and was very tired. I decided to leave the rest of the packing for tomorrow. But, after it seemed that everything was going so well, a very scary episode was waiting for me that evening.

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1. "Missis" [in Polish].
2. Doctor in the NKVD camp in Laband.
3. See the chapter "Three Thousand Zloty Solution."

Part 2

Lala's Mother Hiding in Poland

Chapter 45

The Gold Coin

As Remembered by Antonina G. Berezhnaya Gladky
Translated and Edited by Olga Gladky Verro

In the evening, on October 13, my landlord showed to my room two NKVD agents who were looking for me. They didn't knock, or ask permission to enter; they just barged in without saluting me, or introducing themselves. But I knew the NKVD uniforms, which became familiar to me when I worked in the NKVD camp.

As soon as they got in through the door one of them, looking at the neat piles of clothing and linen lying around the room, asked me, "Are you moving somewhere?"

"No, I just moved into this room." I answered slowly and thought, "They came to take me for deportation to the Soviet Union."

But, instead, the agent gave me an order, "Give us the gold coins!" He said it in such authoritative tone of voice, like he didn't expect "No" for an answer.

I was very surprised to hear it and asked him, "What gold coins?"

"Those given to you by the officers from the NKVD camp," provokingly replied the agent.

"I have no gold coins." I replied with such calm that even I was surprised, because inside I was trembling from fear like a lonely leaf remaining on the branch in the winter.

"Well," he exclaimed with arrogance, "then we shall find them ourselves! Let's begin the search!" he ordered to other agent, who stood silently near the door.

The first thing they searched was my pocketbook and didn't pay attention to a big bundle of Polish zloty that I had from selling all the items that neither my daughter nor I wanted to take with us when we would leave Laband. They searched everywhere and everything in the room thoroughly, demonstrating that they were experts in this work. They searched each item in all piles, going methodically from one to another, and messed up all my careful folding.

I sat quietly on the chair trying to maintain my external calm. In my mind I was asking myself, "How they know that I have the gold coin that belongs to the doctor from the NKVD camp? If they should find it, shall I tell them, or not, that it belongs to Lyudmila Larionovna? What I will tell her if they take it from me?"

I froze from internal fear when they began to search the jacket and the coats hanging on the coat rack. They fingered them inch by inch beginning at the collar, going inside the pockets and proceeding to press between their hands down to the hem. As one of the agents began to search my brown coat I turned my head away to look toward the window, because I was afraid that they would detect my apprehension. I expected every moment some kind of jubilant exclamation that they had found the gold coin. After several long minutes of waiting, and hearing no comments from the agents, I looked back at the coat rack. The agents were not there, they were already searching my suitcase. "They didn't find it! They didn't find it! They didn't find it!" pounded in my head while I tried to maintain my calm composure.

But the NKVD agents appeared very disappointed that they didn't find any gold coins they were searching for. The agent that did all the talking came very close to me; looking sternly into my eyes and showing that he was losing his temper. he asked rudely, "Where did you hide the gold coins?"

"I don't have any gold coins," I answered now without hesitation.

"Well, if you don't tell us, then we have to bring you for interrogation to NKVD quarters." And he ordered me, "Let's go!"

I grabbed quickly from the rack my other lighter coat and purse with my documents and followed him, while the other agent walked behind me. The Polish landlord and his wife were standing in the kitchen near the open door and watching with fear as I was led away by the NKVD agents.

I thought they might take me to the NKVD camp office in the building where I worked before, and if so hoped that I would see *Podpolkovnik* Kozhevnikov and maybe he would rescue me. Instead, they took me to another building, where apparently were the separate offices of the new Repatriation unit, about whom *Podpolkovnik* Kozhevnikov warned Lyudmila Larionovna to be careful. Since they were in charge of repatriation of the Soviet citizens, obviously their offices were separated from the offices where I worked before.

The agents handed me to the guard that was in charge of the prisoners and told him, "Lock her in!" The guard led me to the basement, then through dark corridor, and locked me in a small room. There were no windows, only a small electric light high on the ceiling illuminated the room, which was empty except for a wooden bunk bed without mattress and a metal pail in the corner. I sat on the bed and waited, for what seemed to me very long hours. It was cold and humid and I couldn't stop shivering.

Then I heard steps in the hall and the same guard brought me a warm soup in an aluminum container, but no spoon. I asked him, "When I will be interrogated?"

"Aunty," answered the guard, "maybe tomorrow. All officers are gone for the day. There is nobody here, but you and me." And he locked the door again. The soup, which I had to drink from the container, warmed me inside, and I stopped shivering.

I had plenty of time to think about my strategy on how to behave and what to tell during the interrogation if, of course, I would have one. I decided to be firm and to deny that I have the gold coin. I reasoned, "If they didn't find it during the search, they don't have any evidence against me and against Lyudmila Larionovna. If I talk, we both will be in trouble." And with this definite idea in my mind I fell asleep on the hard bunk bed.

In the morning the guard brought me a cup of hot tea. Then another guard came and told me to follow him. He led me through the dark corridor and up the stairs to the first floor where he stopped at one door. He knocked and when we heard a loud "Da!"[1] he opened the door and let me in the room.

After being all night in the barely lighted room, the bright sunlight from the window blinded me, I covered my eyes with my hand and remained standing near the door. I heard a hard voice in front of me, "Come here and sit down!"

"Sorry," I replied apologetically, "but I cannot see where to go. The bright light blinded me."

The interrogator didn't pay any attention to my excuse and began to question me. "Are you Russian? What is your name?"

I replied promptly, "Yes, I am from the Ukraine. My name is Antonina Gavriylovna Gladkaya."[2]

The interrogator changed his voice to accusatory, asking me the next question, "Why are you remaining in Laband when all Soviet citizens from this town have departed home?"

I removed my hand from my eyes, feeling that I had become used to the bright light, and saw a chair standing in front of a big desk. I walked a few feet and sat down. With the bright light shining in my eyes I couldn't see the face of my interrogator.

"Well," I began slowly, "in the beginning of February I was drafted by the two officers from this NKVD camp to work as an interpreter[3] and to register German men that were being deported to the Soviet Union. I continued to work in the NKVD camp when the census of the Soviet citizens living in the hamlet of Laband was taking place and when they were sent back to the Soviet Union."

"Ah!" he exclaimed and asked again, "Who were the officers that you have worked for?"

I answered promptly, "*Polkovnik* Stepanov and *Podpolkovnik* Kozhevnikov who is still here in the camp, and my direct superior was Captain Komov."

"Ah!" the interrogator with the invisible to me face exclaimed again, and asked, "Do they know that you are still here?"

"Of course!" I replied reassuringly. "*Podpolkovnik* Kozhevnikov knows that now I am waiting when my daughter and her husband, who is an Italian, will return from the Consulate in Prague, where he went to apply for a visa to go with us to the Ukraine."

"Why they had to go all the way to Prague?" he wondered. "Why didn't they go Warsaw?"

"Oh, they had been there, but were told that they need to go to Prague to have his passport from

the Italian Consulate," I invented an impromptu answer.

"Ah! Why your daughter married a foreigner?"

I gave him the answer, like it was very obvious thing that could happen to the young couple, "They fell in love with each other!"

Seemingly the interrogator was satisfied with my simple answer and he did not ask me anything more about my daughter.

After a few moments of silence he asked me, "Where is your husband?"

My heart almost stooped, as in my head flashed the suspicion that they have him here in the camp. But I gave him the truthful answer, "I don't know where he is. Probably in the army, if he is alive."!" he exclaimed and began to knock the pen on the desk, as he was trying to find what he should ask me next. Then he said affirmatively, "So, they know about you here in the camp?"

"Yes, they know." I said calmly.

Then the interrogator asked somewhat hesitantly, "Do you know the woman doctor from the camp?"

"Of course, I know her!" I answered. "She was there all the time when I worked there." And I thought, "Now he will start to ask me about the gold coins."

But he continued, "Tell me what you know about her."

"I know that her name is Lyudmila Larionovna, as everybody was calling her in the camp, but I don't know her last name. She is a good doctor and a very fine young woman."

"Do you know how she manages to have the money to buy fine things for her?"

"I don't know," I answered. "Probably she is receiving a good salary as a military doctor."

"What else do you know about her as a person?" he insisted.

"When I worked in the camp we were all the time very busy in processing German men and we didn't have time to talk with anybody. I know her only as a doctor, a very good doctor. I do not know anything else about her. She never talked with me about her personal life."

"Ah!" the interrogator emitted again his obviously habitual exclamation. I felt that he wanted to know more details about her, but at the same time, for some reason, he was very cautious. I decided that it was better not to tell him anything more, unless he asked for some specific information. If I did that it should not be harmless to her or me.

The interrogator abruptly stopped questioning me and called loudly, "Guard!"

I couldn't believe the interrogation was over and that he had not asked me anything about the gold coin. I got up promptly from the chair before he changed his mind. The guard entered the room. My interrogator ordered, "Put this woman back in the cellar." I walked out without saying anything that could hurt Lyudmila Larionovna or me to the man who interrogated me and whose face I never saw.

They kept me in the basement for three days and didn't interrogate me any more. Staying in that cold and humid room I got a sore throat, but they fed me well with the familiar food that we were receiving before from the camp's kitchen.

After the three days of being locked up in the cold and humid basement the guard came and took me from my cell, telling me that he received an order to let me go home. As I walked through the dark corridor and up the stairs I wondered, "Is it for good that they let me go home? Now they will be watching me and could at any time grab me and send me home."

Outside the building was waiting the NKVD automobile and the guard told me to get in. I was surprised and began to suspect that it might be some trick, but could not imagine where they could take me from here. As I closed the door after me, the soldier driver asked me where I lived and drove me to my home.

It remained a mystery for me why they send me home in the automobile, except that maybe they didn't want anybody in the camp to see me walking from their building.

During these three days of being locked up I had plenty of time to make my plans for the immediate future. I decided that, if they let me go free, I should immediately return the gold coin to Lyudmila Larionovna.

I entered my room and right away removed my wrinkled coat in which I slept three nights and put on my brown coat. I put my hand in the right pocket to touch the gold coin that I kept there wrapped in a small handkerchief. It was not there. I checked in the left pocket, just to be sure maybe I didn't remember in what pocket I have put it. The left pocket was empty too. "Well," I thought, "if the NKVD agents didn't find it, then somebody else did". There was no one else, but my Polish landlord, his wife,

and their teenage son in the house. One of them had taken it.

I went right away in the kitchen where both husband and wife were sitting at the table. "*Pani*," I spoke to the wife, "they released me on one condition that I bring right away the gold coin to the NKVD camp. But in my absence the gold coin disappeared; it was in this coat's pocket. There was no one else in the house, but your husband, you, and your son. One of you took it. Please give it back."

The wife looked at her husband as if expecting him to give me some answer, but he was listening and not saying anything. I began to implore them, "If I don't bring it back right away, they will come again and arrest and maybe kill me. But they also will search the whole house, and this time they shall not leave until they find it. And you will be in a big, big trouble when they find it, because they would consider that you were helping me to hide it."

Hearing this, the wife became very upset and started to talk nervously in Polish to her husband trying to convince him. I understood that he had taken the gold coin and I left the task of persuading him to his wife.

"*Pani*," I said again, "I beg you, they will kill me, but they will put your house upside down to find the gold coin. And who knows what NKVD agents could do to you, or to your husband! That coin is not worth having all that trouble for you."

The wife was now scared of what could happen to them and changed her way of talking to her husband from persuading him to insisting that he return the coin to me. Finally he got up, went in their bedroom and returned with the gold coin still wrapped up in my handkerchief and silently handed it to me. I put it in my coat pocket, and without saying anything, right away walked out of the house.

I decided to try again to see Lyudmila Larionovna. I walked back and forth across the road from the NKVD camp fence hoping that she could see me from a dispensary. My persistence paid off and she came out. She stopped on the grass near the camp fence and didn't cross the road and said, "Good day, Antonina Gavriylovna. What happened? Let's not stand while we are talking." We both began to walk back and forth, she on the grass along the camp's fence, and I, across the road along the hamlet buildings.

I told her the whole story, "Three days ago the new NKVD agents from this camp came to my room and asked me to give them the gold coins. How could they know that I had your gold coin? I told them that I didn't have any gold coins. They searched everything in my room. I had your gold coin wrapped up in a handkerchief in the right pocket of the coat I am wearing now. It has very deep pockets. We were lucky that they didn't find it. But they arrested me and kept me three day in the basement of a building where are the offices of the new NKVD unit which I had never seen when I worked there."

"One officer interrogated me and asked me many questions about me and why I didn't depart home with all the other Soviet citizens. I told him that we worked in this NKVD camp when they took census and deported all Soviet citizens. The officer asked me with whom I worked in this camp and I told him the names of all officers that I knew. I didn't mention your name. Then he asked me if the officers I worked for know that I am in Laband and I told him, 'Yes, they know.'

"Then he asked me why I am not going home now that I don't work any more in the camp. I explained that I am waiting for my daughter and her husband to get visa from the Soviet Consulate in Prague to go with us to Ukraine."

Lyudmila Larionovna interrupted me, "Olga and Giulio finally went to Prague? I hope they find there a solution to remain together."

I replied, "I hope so too."

After this interruption I continued to tell her about the interrogation, "Suddenly the interrogator changed the subject and asked me if I knew the camp's doctor and ordered me to tell him everything about you. I told him that I knew you only as a doctor and nothing else."

Lyudmila Larionovna said, "That impudent man! He is angry with me, because I rejected his advances to be his lover. Now he is trying to collect the dirt about me. He heard rumors about the gold coins and ordered to search us in the camp too. I was lucky that you had it."

"Really?" I asked. "Then they knew that I was doing business for you. It is better that I don't do any more bartering with your gold coins. It will be dangerous for you and for me."

"You are right," agreed Lyudmila Larionovna and added, "But since they didn't find it, they would not search you or me again."

"I hope so too," I replied. "I brought your gold coin back to you. It is wrapped in a handkerchief. I will put it here on the grass and would walk away. You come here and take it."

"All right. But listen, I think that it will be safer that we don't see each other for a while," she

suggested.

"I agree. But if you need me, I live now in the house next to where I lived before. Good-bye, Lyudmila Larionovna!"

"Thank you, Antonina Gavriylovna, for being such a good friend. And I am very sorry that you had to stay three days in the cellar. Good-bye!"

I placed the gold coin wrapped in my handkerchief on the grass at the edge of the road and slowly walked away. When I looked back, she was already walking to the camp's gate. This was my last encounter with the NKVD camp's doctor.

As I walked home, I decided that, if I wanted to remain in Poland, now was the time for me to disappear from Laband, where it was known that I was a Soviet citizen. I returned to my room and began quickly to pack my belongings.

I remembered that the daughter of my Polish landlord lived in Zabrze, the same town where Rufin was working in the Town Hall. The wife of my landlord has recounted to me that their daughter a had hard time to take care of her two-and-half-year old boy. She was working, but it was not easy for her while she was waiting for her husband to return home from Germany. This gave me the idea that maybe it was possible to stay a few days with her before I contacted Rufin. I thought, "It does not cost anything to ask."

I went right away to the kitchen, where both husband and wife were sitting at the table and told them, "I gave to the NKVD the gold coin. But I don't know what will happen next. I believe that it is better for me and for you that I go away from here as soon as possible." I saw relief on their faces and they agreed with me wholeheartedly. I asked them straightforwardly, "Do you think that your daughter in Zabrze could give me a place to stay for a very short time? I shall pay her well for her hospitality."

Husband and wife consulted with each other and husband said, "*Pani*, my wife and I think that our daughter will be glad to have you. My son could help you to transport your luggage on your cart all the way to Zabrze to her apartment if you pay him something. When *Pani* wants to leave?"

I didn't expect such a good offer that would solve my problem of moving all my possessions out of Laband. Before they could change their minds I quickly replied, "Very early tomorrow morning." I warned them though, "It will be better for you and for your daughter that, if the NKVD agents or anybody else, especially the neighbor Izsorski, would ask you where I was going from here, you tell them that I went to Katovice to take the train home to Ukraine." They agreed to this condition.

I finished packing before evening and went to bed early, anticipating the long trip tomorrow morning. Besides, I needed a rest. My body was aching all over from sleeping three nights on the hard bunk bed; I had the sore throat from staying in the humid NKVD cellar; and most of all I was exhausted from the three days of tension and fear.

On October 17, 1945 early in the morning the teenage son of my landlord carried my luggage into the courtyard and tied it down with cord to the cart. Both husband and wife got up early to see me off. I thanked them both for their hospitality and help and told them that I left in the room my furniture, pots and pans and dishes, which were too heavy to carry, and that they could have them with my compliments.

Everybody in my landlord family felt relieved when I departed. And, of course, I was happy to be able so quickly to leave Laband. Slowly we began our journey to Zabrze.

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1. "Yes" [in Russian].
2. Russian spelling of the feminine surname Gladky.
3. See the chapter "NKVD Lager In Laband."

Part 2

Lala's Mother Hiding in Poland

Chapter 46

Refuge in the Home of Rufin and Lidia

As Remembered by Antonina G. Berezhnaya Gladky
Translated and Edited by Olga Gladky Verro

As the day was breaking, the young Polish boy and I slowly began our journey from Laband.[1] The teenage son of my landlord pulled the cart with all my belongings and I walked beside him.[2] We traveled by foot on the country roads and on the streets of villages and towns, all the way to the town of Zabrze.[3]

It was a very tiring trip that took us all day. We stopped many times to rest, to drink water and to eat some food that I took with me. We were lucky that it was not a very cold day and it was not raining, which is very common in this region at that time of the year.

Late in the evening we arrived at our destination to the apartment of boy's older sister in the town of Zabrze. We were both exhausted. The boy explained to his sister that her father and mother sent me to stay with her, and I promised to pay her well for her hospitality. The young woman accepted me without reservations. I had some food brought with me and I shared it that evening with the boy and his sister. She prepared the ersatz coffee, for which I had offered sugar, because she had none.

That evening my hostess and I got acquainted a little with each other. But her brother and I were so tired that we excused ourselves very early in the evening and asked her to show us where she will put us for the night. As we put our heads on the pillows, in a few minutes we were sound asleep.

The next morning I paid the boy for his service and gave him money for the tickets to return home on the streetcar and the train. Before the young woman left for work we sat at the table to drink the ersatz coffee and she fed her two-and-half-years old son.

Looking at her I thought that it would be better that a Polish woman would go to see Rufin at the Town Hall. I asked my hostess, "Could you do me a big favor? Before you return home from work could you stop at the Town Hall? I need that you see a good friend of my family, Rufin Swizsi, who works there. Tell him that Giulio's mother-in-law had arrived in town yesterday evening and is staying with you in your apartment. Ask him if he could come to see me as soon as possible and give him your address."

She graciously agreed to it and asked me if I could take care of her son to save her money that she pays the woman who keeps him while she is at work. I agreed to this exchange of favors. When she returned home she told me, "It was easy to find him. He promised to come and see you tomorrow after work."

While she was away during the day, she left one potato to make a puree for her son. I had my food for lunch, which I shared with him and gave the boy some sweetened water to drink as I had my ersatz coffee.

When I tried to find in her kitchen the provisions to prepare the sup¬per, I saw that she had almost nothing on the shelves, except a couple of potatoes that she probably kept for her boy. I used my supplies to cook for that evening. She came home only with a piece of bread. The young woman was most grateful for the supper I prepared. I remembered that her mother told me about the hard time her daughter had.

At the table and during the evening she recounted to me about her life. She was a simple Polish young woman who during the nine months of occupation of her country by the Soviet Army became very skinny from food deprivation but still looked healthy and attractive in her youthful simplicity.

She told me, "My husband is German. He was badly wounded on the Russian front. After he recuperated, he was assigned to work in this town. We have fallen in love and got married. When the

Soviet Army came close to our town, he was called, as all German men, in the civil defense unit, which retreated into Germany. And I re¬mained here with our son.

I am waiting for my husband to return home soon, because someone told me that they saw him alive somewhere in Germany; but so far I had no news from him." She emitted a deep sigh and concluded, "He was a very nice man; he would never abandon me and our son whom he adored."

Then she asked me anxiously, "Do you think that Polish government would allow the German men who lived here to return to their families?"

"It is hard to guess," I answered, "because now the borders are controlled not by the Polish, but by the Soviet Army who is allowing going through only the people they want." Then I had consoled her, "Maybe it is better that he is in Germany. You have probably a better chance to reunite with him sooner than if he was here. Do you know that all German men that remained in Poland were taken by the Soviets to work in the Soviet Union? Who knows if all those men would ever return home?"

The young woman listened to me, as if I was an oracle giving her hope for the future. "Thank you, *Pani,* for your good words," she said with real gratitude.

The next day Rufin came to see me after work. It was the first time that I met him, except, seeing him for a few minutes from the window of the streetcar when he and Giulio have recognized each other. But, because he knew well Giulio and Lala, he knew so many things about our life that we felt at once like old friends.

I told him how Giulio came home from Katowice with the news that the Red Cross convoy train repatriating the Italian prisoners of war was departing to Prague the next morning; how he and Lala packed in a hurry their belongings. Rufin was genuinely happy that everything went smoothly with the¬ir departure.

I asked Rufin, "Have you received any letters from Giulio and my daughter mailed from Prague?"

"No," he said, "we didn't receive any letters yet."

Hearing from him this answer I expressed my worry, "Something did go wrong in Prague. It is already eighteen days that they left. They promised to write from Prague on your address and in your name."

Rufin reassured me, "With the marriage certificate[4] they had, they should not have any problem in the Italian consulate. I believe that the mail between the European countries is not going regularly yet."

As about me, Rufin said, "There is no problem for you to stay in my home, but I need a few days to arrange everything before I come and take you with your luggage."

He asked the young woman, "Is it possible for *Pani* Antonina to stay in your apartment for a few more days?"

She answered without hesitation, "She can stay with me as long as she may need it."

I stayed with her for three more days until Rufin had the time to arrange my move to his home.

On October 21, Rufin came to take me to Michalkowice,[5] where he lived. He said, "We will take today only a part of your luggage. The rest of it I will take a little at the time if the young woman does not object."

"You may leave it here," said my hostess, "it does not bother me."

"Thank you," said Rufin and explained, "I don't want that my neighbors would become suspicious about *Pani* Antonina moving in my house."

I paid generously with the Polish Zloty the young woman for her hospitality and left some sugar for her baby.

It was not completely dark yet when we arrived in Rufin's little town. We didn't go directly to his home, but he brought me to the house of his wife's parents. There were lots of people for the occasion of somebody's birthday. They put me on the covered porch where I stayed until everybody was gone. Then, under the cover of the night, he and his wife Lidia took me to their apartment. His wife, Lidia, prepared for me a small room off the kitchen. There were a few pieces of simple furniture, a bed for me to sleep, and a small chest of drawers.

During the supper Rufin said, "Michalkowice is a very small town and it would be impossible to conceal for long time that you are staying with us. But, to prevent suspicion of our neighbors that you are Soviet citizen, we should agree on a few rules that we all could follow. Since *Pani* speaks French well, the best thing is to tell to the curious that you are French and are waiting until you could return home."

We also agreed that another practical thing was to make me as little as possible noticeable by the people outside the home. I told him, "Since I had to earn my upkeep by jobbing on the market in Katovice, I will spend there long hours. Therefore, I would go out very early with the first streetcar and

would return home when it would be almost dark."

On October 22, the next day after my arrival in Rufin and Lidia's home, I received two postcards mailed from Prague by Lala and Giulio. It was a short but important message in French: "Everything is fine as we expected. Prague is beautiful. We will write to you when we arrive in Turin. Love, Olga, Giulio."

All three of us, Rufin, Lidia, and I rejoiced from the good news. Rufin especially was happy that the marriage certificate that he got for Giulio and Lala served its purpose. A telegram arrived much later, on November 1, because it went first to Krakow, where there is another town called Michalkowice.

On October 28, at the end of the first week after my arrival in Michalkowice, I wrote a long letter[6] to my daughter and Giulio describing them the last two-and-half weeks after their departure. I mentioned my scary encounter with the NKVD agents using the name "our cousins," how they arrested, interrogated, and released me; and how I quickly departed from Laband to Zabrze.

From the first week staying with Rufin and Lidia I was getting up early and going to the market in Katowice where I continued doing business of buying, reselling, and bartering, as I did before to provide for Lala, Giulio, and me. Only there was no Giulio to help me carry the heavy items and helping me on the market.

I was returning home late in the afternoon bringing food that Lidia asked me to barter, or to buy, for feeding all three of us. Therefore, I felt that I was providing now for my new family. Lidia was a good cook and we ate well. She was also a very pleasant, sincere, and good-natured young woman who made me feel right away as a member of the family.

Rufin was a very practical man and he appreciated my contribution in providing food, which they could not afford to buy on his salary. He treated me with respect and was genuinely concerned to keep his word that he gave to Giulio and Lala to take good care of me.

I told him that Polish police began to check the identification cards and sometimes even surrounded the market to catch German women who were not allowed selling on the market. It was also not very safe for me to be caught as a Soviet citizen. Therefore, Rufin, who worked in the Town Hall of Zabrze, immediately made for me the Polish identification card. While presenting me the card, he complimented me, "You speak Polish already so well that no one would take you for a foreigner."

By that time I really knew Polish reasonably well, especially the market jargon. But I had an accent, about which somebody on the market asked me if I was from the town of Krakow. I answered that I lived there before. After that I used this as my cover for not speaking with the local accent.

Rufin and Lidia lived in a house that had several apartments. In the apartment next door lived a mother and a daughter who worked somewhere in the government offices. Although Rufin and Lidia presented me to them and to a few other acquaintances as a French woman, they suggested, "*Pani*, once in a while buy on the market some good coffee and give it as a present to these neighbors to keep them friendly and to prevent them from reporting to the Polish authorities, in case they should become suspicious of your identity."

I did what they suggested. I was also buying a good coffee and some other products for Lidia's sister without any profit for myself. She had a little grocery shop on the street front of her parents' house, which was on the same street where Rufin and Lidia lived. She was reselling these products making a small profit.

Pietrowski family was small: Lidia's parents, Lidia, her sister, and brother who had a wife and two little girls. They all lived in Michalkowice not far from each other. They had very close and truly affectionate relationship. All of them were very good to me right from the beginning and made me feel as a part of their happy family. I was invited in their homes on all holidays and family celebrations, as well as on many Sundays by the Mother for the afternoon tea.

Lidia's mother liked to hear the story about how my family was able to escape from the Soviet Union. During one of my first visits, the Mother told me, "I have also a very interesting story to tell you about our family. After the revolution in Russia we gave asylum to a middle-aged White Army officer. He miraculously was able to reach the Polish border during the civil war, when the Reds defeated his unit and he was able to escape from being shot. His family remained in Russia, but he never wrote to them fearing to cause them harm from the reprisals by the infamous at that time GPU. He was a very fine and educated man. He lived with us for many years until he died in our home. After his death we wrote to his family in Russia offering to send them his belongings. The family thanked us for taking care of their loved one, but didn't want anything to be sent to them."

She reflected for a while and added, "Isn't it a very strange coincidence that after many years my daughter is giving a refuge to a Russian woman who also escaped from the Bolsheviks and does not want

to be deported to the concentration camp in the Soviet Union?" She shook her head, like she couldn't figure it out and wondered, "It looks like our family was destined to give asylum to the Russians who escape from the Bolsheviks."

"Maybe it was not a coincidence," I responded and explained, "My maternal grandfather and grandmother emigrated in the late 1800's from the city of Warsaw to eastern part of Ukraine. They were Polish by the name Grudzinsky.[7] You see, maybe it was a destiny that I had to find a refuge in the land of my ancestors and to find help from their compatriots." This revelation made a big impression on the whole Pietrowski family and I felt that they accepted this, as if it was a fate that led me to their daughter and son-in-law to seek the refuge.

Rufin's parents lived in the small house inside the same courtyard where their son lived. I didn't have a chance to know them too well, because they were already very frail when I arrived. They stayed in their apartment and didn't go out or participate in the Pietrowski family gatherings. I think that Lidia was helping them during the day when I was on the market. I saw them probably once or twice during the whole time I lived with Rufin and Lidia. Rufin had two younger brothers who didn't visit him often or probably when I was not at home, so, I didn't know them too well either.

During the long evenings after supper Lidia, Rufin, and I sat in the kitchen and talked. They liked to listen about the strange events that my family lived through and were amazed at the many circumstances and people that helped us to overcome all the odds that were against us.

When Lidia and Rufin were talking about their life, their joys and concerns, it was unavoidable for them to share with me their disappointment of not having children. Lidia told me that every Sunday in church she was lighting a candle to the Virgin Mary and every year she and Rufin went on pilgrimage to pray the Virgin Mary of Czestochova[8] to ask for her blessings and to beg her for a miracle to have a child. She told me, "In the spring we will be going to Czestochova. You shall come with us to pray for your loved ones."

Although Rufin was a devoted Catholic and prayed for a miracle, I found out that he was also attempting to find a more practical way to make a baby for himself. One day I had a very successful day on the market and decided to go to Zabrze to visit the young woman who gave me hospitality when I escaped from Laband. I wanted to take some food for her little boy.

She was sincerely happy to see me and very grateful for the food I brought for her child. Then somewhat hesitantly she shared with me her concern that Rufin was visiting her very often after work.

"*Pani*", she asked me, "tell me what I should do? *Pan* Rufin told me that he is married for ten years to a wonderful woman whom he loves very much, but that his wife is not able to have children. He began first by imploring me, and lately by insisting, that he and I make for him a baby, which he will take home right after birth. He is promising me that he would take good care of me and of my boy during and after my pregnancy. I told him that I am waiting for my husband to return home soon from Germany. But *Pan* Rufin is scaring me that it is unlikely that the German men would be allowed to come back to Poland."

I answered to the young woman, "It is true that *Pan* Rufin and his wife have a great desire to have a baby. Also, *Pan* Rufin is probably right that you have to wait very long time to be reunited with your husband."

Then I reflected for a while and added, "I couldn't give you any advice on what you should do with *Pan* Rufin's proposal of making with him a baby. It is especially not right for me, because *Pan* Rufin and his wife are very good to me by allowing me to live in their home. I think that on this matter you should make your own decision. It is too personal and too sensitive for anybody to give you an advice on what to do, or how to handle this delicate situation."

The young woman agreed with me and asked me not to mention our conversation to Rufin and his wife. Later I found out that Rufin was unsuccessful in convincing her to make for him a baby.

After receiving the postcards and a telegram from Lala and Giulio, which they mailed from Prague, I didn't receive from them any letters for a very long time. I was very worried about the health of my daughter and the baby who was due in the middle of November.

Rufin was consoling me, "It is impossible that your daughter and Giulio are not writing to you. I am sure that the problem is with the international mail that is not normalized yet." After agreeing with him, I continued to worry anyway.

When I was complaining about not knowing anything about my husband, or was worrying what would happen to me, Lidia in her calm and sweet voice would tell me, "If the Providence guided your family all this time from seemingly insolvable situations by showing you the right road to follow, why should it abandon you now? Have faith and patience to wait when the new road opens for you."

To this Rufin would add, “We believe that your family was destined to overcome all the obstacles on your way to freedom. It has to be a happy ending to your story, it cannot happen otherwise!”

After such convincing arguments I almost believed that they were right and that I should be more patient and give time to the situation in Europe to become stable after the chaos created by the war.

Every day when I was returning home from the market my first question to Lidia was, “Are there any letters for me?” Lidia would look at me with the sorrowful eyes and shake her head and Rufin would try to convince me that international mail from Italy was not working yet.

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1. Antonina G. Berezhnaya Gladky, letters to her daughter Olga, Michalkowice, Poland, October 1945, private collection of Olga Gladky Verro.
2. See the chapter “The Gold Coin.”
3. A small town in southwestern Poland near the town of Katowice [in Polish], Katowitz [in German].
4. See the chapter “Three Thousand Zloty Solution.”
5. A small town in southwestern Poland near the town of Katowice [in Polish].
6. Antonina G. Berezhnaya Gladky, a letter to her daughter Olga, Michalkowice, Poland, October 28, 1945. Private collection of Olga Gladky Verro.
7. See the chapter “Gavriyl Daniylovich Berezhnoy.”
8. Famous Sanctuary in Poland.

Waiting for the Letters

As Remembered by Antonina G. Gladky
Translated and Edited by Olga Gladky Verro

It was already the end of November and, except for the two postcards and a telegram sent from Prague, there were no letters from my daughter and Giulio. Not knowing if they were receiving my letters through the mail, I decided to send my letter through an Italian who was going home soon and was trying to find him at the market in Katovice.

On November 29, 1945, I wrote them a very long letter.[1] In it I complained about not receiving any letters from them and that I worried about Lala's health and about the birth of the little one.

About myself, I assured them that I am remaining at Rufin's home as a member of the family. However, during the day I travel to the market and return home in the evening very tired. For this reason and also because it is becoming very cold to remain outside all day long, I am thinking about changing my work.

I also shared with them my concern that I could not even imagine what would happen to me in the future. I informed my daughter that I wrote to Monsieur Demey[2] and that I forwarded him Giulio's and my addresses with a hope that if my husband is alive, he would write to him. I also asked him if it was possible for him to send me some kind of a document stating that I was French—I thought that it could become useful in the future to have alternative nationality.

I mentioned that I disappeared from Laband in a big hurry and never returned back. Regarding our "cousins," as we agreed to refer to Soviets, I said that they are still here, but not all, only a few but like those we worked with in Laband—they would understand that I meant NKVD.

I regretted that my daughter and Giulio departed so quick that we had no time to discuss their future and mine. At that time it seemed that our separation shouldn't be very long and that we would see each other soon. Before their departure I hadn't the time to give them my advice and as a mother I felt that I should write it now.

> To my daughter I wrote, "Lala, don't forget that you have a difficult character and Giulio is hot-tempered and nervous. I don't know how the family life is over there, but I am sure that it is different than it was in our family. You should know that all Giulio's requests are probably well grounded and you should conform to them."
>
> To Giulio I wrote, "I remember all our conversations and that you were almost always right; most of all, you could anticipate the events that were ahead of us. That's why I hope that in your life with Lala you could always protect her, as you have done it until now. I hope that you always would be gentle with her and never forget that she lost her parents and found you. It was her destiny to encounter you far from her motherland." Then I advised him: "Your life with Lala will depend mostly from you. You should show her your ideal of married life; but don't be pedant and don't forget that she has also her individual character." And I asked him to remember that she was not prepared to be a mother, but that I hope this would come under the guidance and protection of his mother and that I was sure that she would become a good mother and a good wife.

For some reason I didn't finish writing this letter and it was not mailed for a few days. Then, on December 4, 1945 when I returned from the market, a joyous surprise was waiting for me. Lidia, all radiant, gave me a letter from my daughter. I began to cry from joy. This was the first letter[3] that my daughter wrote on October 17, 1945, a few days after they arrived in Turin, Italy. I quickly read it in French and then translated it word by word to Lidia:

> Our dear Maman! We arrived in Turin on October 13. In Prague all the papers were ready in one day; we were not the first in our situation. Also it was very good that we departed with the convoy train—the things were much easier and it was better with food.

From Prague we passed through the Munich American Repatriation Assembly Center. Naturally, there were not too many commodities on the train. But in general everything went fine and we arrived at home in good health.

The family, which is very simple, without too many pretenses, received me very well and I am very pleased with this. However, there are too many people for this small apartment. We will try to change the situation as soon as possible.

All Giulio's problems[4] were resolved without complications. On the first of November Giulio will begin to work at the same place where he worked before.

The life here in general is hard, but it is possible to live if one is working. The prices are approximately like in Poland, but the workers receive higher wages. Today I went for a medical visit. Everything is regular.

Of course, she wrote that they were hoping that all my affairs concluded well and asked where I am living now; how was my market business going; and how was my health.

At the end she she wrote, "We will never forget to thank Rufin and his wife for all they have done for us."And before forwarding their greetings she said, "I hope to see you next year.

As I was reading this letter I cried from joy. And what a joy it was! I was so happy that everything was going well and that all were in good health.

But now that the first letter from Italy arrived I was hoping that the others would follow. Now it didn't matter so much that we could not see each other soon. It was sufficient for me to receive their letters to feel happy. It was enough for me to read the news about their life. My preoccupation about my daughter almost disappeared. She was safe.

But the letter was written in October. Naturally, I was eager to know the most recent news about the birth of my grandchild that was due in the middle of November. Was the baby healthy? Was it Alfio or Lia?[5] And, of course, how was my daughter's health after the childbirth?

But the destiny of my husband was remaining much on my mind. Did he survived? Was he successful in avoiding being captured by the Soviets? Or was he already deported to the concentration camp in Siberia?

I was also worrying about my own situation and avoided to have close encounters with the Soviet soldiers on the market, but there were none in Michalkowice. And I kept the Polish neighbors well provided with good coffee to keep them happy and to prevent them from reporting me to the Polish police.

I was becoming very skillful businesswoman on the market and was finding the new ways of procuring the merchandise for resale. The Polish police was not allowing the German women to do business on the market. This policy against them was in response to the annexation of this part of Poland to Germany at the beginning of World War II. Knowing this, I went to several nearby villages and offered my services to the German women to sell their merchandise for a reasonable commission and to buy, or barter for them the products they order. Soon I had many German women who were seeking my services and I became known in the neighboring villages as a reliable person to do the business with. The women were entrusting me with very expensive items knowing that I will sell them at the best price on the market.

Lidia and Rufin were very impressed with my entrepreneurial skills and appreciated my providing them with food, which with Rufin's salary would not have been possible for them to have. Although in the fall the weather was cold and it was hard for me to stay the whole day on the market, I bravely resisted wind, rain, and mud. Then the winter came and with it more cold, ice, and snow. I had to stop going in the villages and limited myself to conduct my business only on the market. It was helpful that the days were shorter and I was coming home earlier. I knew that I had to earn not only my rent and upkeep, but also to repay Lidia and Rufin for their help and the risk they were taking in hiding me from the Soviets.

During the weeks before Christmas there was an increase in the activity on the market, many nice things changed hands and one could find to buy, or barter all kinds of food. This was the first Christmas after the end of war and people wanted to celebrate it as a real holiday. I found several items to buy for my daughter, hoping that the time shall come when I will be able to mail her a package. On the last week before Christmas Lidia asked me to find mutton meat for the roast, and beef for the soup. It did cost me a lot of zloty, but I was glad that I could find it and make her happy.

Rufin had holiday vacation and he found a nice Christmas tree and decorated it. It was beautiful! On Christmas Eve we all went to the Midnight Mass that was celebrated according to the Catholic

tradition. On Christmas day Lidia prepared a festive dinner: soup with meat and pasta, roast of mutton with potatoes, and compote from cherries she preserved in the summer.

After an abundant dinner Rufin sprawled himself on the sofa to rest. Lidia and I cleared the table and also rested. Our leisurely conversation centered on my daughter and Giulio. We were guessing how they were celebrating their first Christmas in their new family and with the new holiday customs. We hoped that their Christmas dinner was as abundant as ours.

On December 26, I wrote a very long letter[6] to my daughter and Giulio. Rufin, Lidia, and I congratulated them with Christmas and with their birthdays, Giulio's on December 22, and Lala's on January 14, and the baby's that should have been sometime in November. I wished them to be in good health, from which depended everything else, happiness, good mood, wealth, and all the good things in life. I expressed my hope that they had a very good Christmas and described my Christmas with Rufin and Lidia—all the traditional ceremonies, the beautiful Christmas tree, and a very good festive dinner.

Then I informed them about practical aspects of my life. "I work for my new family as I was working with you. My commercial affairs [on the market] could be measured by how we live and eat; it is like we used to eat in the last months with you. Naturally, it is very difficult to remain now outside when it is cold, but what can I do, one needs to live the way as the life demands it." I also said that I purchased something for them hoping that the time will come when I could send them the packages and also some money.

I knew that they worry about my health, so I reassured them, "My stomach, thank God, was very good during the two months that I am at Rufin's home. I think that being nervous was making it to hurt before."

About my mood and how I felt, I wrote, "The time goes by very quickly and the future comes by itself without my inviting it. It is very hard to remain alone, but I was lucky that I am in one family that is happy, in good health, always in good mood, and very serene. …As you can see, the conditions of my life are very good, I cannot complain, except that I miss you. Maybe to be alone will become a habit before my life will turn in other direction."

I gave my daughter practical advice on nursing the baby. I told her that I couldn't imagine how she manage to do everything and how I would like to be with her, to help her, and to care for her.

Of course, I asked her to write all the details about her life and about the baby. And I also sent my, Rufin's and Lidia's kisses to all three of them and our regards to all Verro family.

Finally, on January 13, 1946, we have received a postcard,[7] mailed on November 14, 1945 from Turin, Italy, with the greetings of the newborn little Lia. Now, at least I knew that I had a granddaughter.

But there were no more letters from my daughter or from Giulio.I began to lose my patience waiting for the news and on January 16 I mailed a postcard[8] with short message: "Always waiting for the news from you, dearest Lala, Giulio, and little Lia. Good health to my granddaughter! We congratulate you with the newborn. And how I would like to be with you and help you. …But I am sad, because I don't receive any letters from you. …It is very painful, but what I can do, maybe it is difficult for you to write, or it is a problem with the mail."

Another week, went by and there were no letters. I was worrying and had no patience any more. On January 23 I mailed the second postcard[9] complaining that, I have written often, but I don't receive anymore from them, except the postcards from Prague, the letter mailed when they arrived in Turin in October, and the postcard notifying Lia's birth. I said that it is very painful for me, because I worry about the health of Lala and the little Lia.

I mentioned that my business was going with great difficulty and I was afraid about my future because I didn't know how long I could remain in the Rufin's home. And I asked their opinion on what I should do when arrives a moment that I had to leave?

At the end I added, that I wrote to my father, asking him if by any chance my husband arrived home. However, I didn't write them that it was probably a big mistake to disclose my address in Poland; but I was so anxious to find anything about him and acted on the spur of the moment putting myself in danger to be found and deported 'home.'

January, then February of 1946 went by without news from my dear ones. Then half of March was gone—it was five-and-half months since they left Poland on the first of October, 1945. All kinds of bad thoughts were coming to my mind, "What might have happened to my daughter? Maybe the childbirth

had not been easy and she is sick. But then Giulio should have written to me. It seems impossible that there was something wrong with both of them."

Rufin and Lidia were reassuring me that it was just a problem of post-war mail between the countries and that I should have more patience. It was easy for them to tell me this, but it was not easy for me to stop worrying after not knowing anything about my daughter for such a long time.

Finally, in the evening of March 15 when I arrived home from the market, Rufin gave me the letter from my daughter. It was the second letter[10] from her since they left Laband. Without removing my coat and boots, I began reading it aloud because it was written in German and Rufin and Lidia could hear the news.

January 27, 1946, Turin

Dear Mama, Rufin and Lidia! I have written you a letter long time ago, but I don't know if you received it. I think it is better to tell you shortly everything from the beginning. We were on the road only thirteen days; we were three days in Prague and more then a week in a American Repatriation Assembly Center in Munich. …I was not the only woman in the convoy train.

On November 6, 1945 we got married in the Town Hall in Turin. On November 12, little Lia was born. She is already weighing 4,400 grams and when she was born she was 2,900 grams. She is very lively. She is the first person in our home. We are happy that she is healthy and grows very fast. She has quick gray eyes and beautiful little feet.

I feel very good in the family, much better then I expected. Only it is difficult to find for us an apartment. We are six persons in one small bedroom and the kitchen. Giulio is working at his old place. The wages are low and everything is expensive. For our family it is little bit easier, because we have three men who are working. Notwithstanding that the heating is the most expensive item, we are heating for our little one to stay warm.

With the Italian language everything goes well. I understand almost everything. Naturally, with the little one is hard to find the time to study grammar. And in addition, we have enough to wash, to iron, and to mend for the three men, the baby, and us, two women.

There is so much to tell and it is impossible to put everything in one letter. You should have also many news and we are hoping to receive a letter from you soon.

Lala was asking me about my health, where I am working; and if I heard anything about Aunt Antonina and children.[11] Their mail with France was now regular and she wrote already one letter to Monsieur Demey—"maybe some news from Papa and Zoya[12] will come from him."

She ends abruptly her letter because "Lia needs to be fed by now and it is already twelve o'clock at night."

On January 28 there are brief additions to the letter, "[Today] we all were so happy! we finally have received your first letter. We all pray God to help you. I hope to see you soon. Is it possible?" And a note from Giulio to Rufin giving him the good news about Bruno[13] who came home only two months before them and that he is also working in his old place.

There was also a note from Giulio's parents and Domenico with their sincere greetings and best wishes. And finally, "the warmest kisses and a lot of gratitude" from Giulio and Lala.

I read aloud my daughter's letter several times and the three of us, Lidia, Rufin, and I, discussed all the news. We were trying to imagine the life in this Italian family where my daughter was living now. Lidia and Rufin were envious of my daughter and Giulio for having a little Lia. When we were trying to imagine how big Lia was now Lidia commented, "How lucky they are to have a baby!"

But Rufin, for whom the subject about the babies was like a thorn in their otherwise very happy marriage, changed the discussion to other news in the letter, "They got married in the Town Hall just in time before Lia was born giving her legitimate status and a name."

Two days later, I received the third letter from my daughter mailed on February 11, 1946 from Turin.[14] This time I had a double bonus. Both my daughter and Giulio wrote and they were in French, which I preferred to those previously written in German which Rufin and Lidia could understand.

In this letter my daughter was asking my forgiveness for not writing her letters more often and explained her every day routine: "In the morning I have to spend lots of time with the little one, to feed her,

clean her, change the diapers. Then I go to buy bread and wine in the nearby shops. After I return, Mamma goes to the market and to the cooperative to buy food, and then she cooks. I put in order all the clothes of our three workers, and of the little one; and put in order the bedroom."

She describes also the food they eat: "In the morning for breakfast we have chicory coffee with some milk. When Giulio, Domenico, and Babbo (that's Dad in Italian) arrive for lunch we have soup, or macaroni with tomato sauce, and then meat, or sausage, or fish with vegetables, and for dessert we always have some kind of fruit. With the meal we drink wine diluted with water. We have similar menu for the supper as for lunch."

And the rest of the day they also have plenty to do: "After lunch we wash the dishes, put in order the kitchen where every day we mop the floor; and every day we have to wash clothes and diapers of the little one and clothes of our three men. But it goes smoothly like this, if the little one remains good, which is not very often and then we are late with our chores. Then we wash the dishes, collect the washed clothes from the cloth line off the balcony and take care of the little one."

The evenings are also busy—they mend the socks and underwear. Now I could imagine how much work should be done for the family of six. And it seems that my daughter begins to accept it when she writes, "It is the duty of all the Italian women who have family."

I was glad to hear that she gained lots of weight but it created a problem that none of her dresses fit her any more. However, she managed herself to alter the black coat with the fur and is planning to alter her dresses. It was good that they brought with them all the clothes and fabrics that I insisted they would take and she confirms it, "In the spring, we need to make for me a suit and need to spend money only for a dressmaker." However, they need to buy for her the shoes. I thought right away that I could buy them here, but then… how to mail them.

Of course, Lala knew that I was interested more then anything else to hear about Lia and she gave me a good report about her: "Lia was born in good health, very vigorous and lively. She has a very nice smile, she recognizes our voices, she babbles, and she is already artful. She likes to be held and be walked around the room, and listen to Giulio's singing. The Grandfather and Grandmother, *Nonno* and *Nonna*, love the little one very much. They try to do for her everything possible. The Grandmother has already knitted for her a set from the white wool for the spring. Giulio loves the little one very much, but he has always in his head to have also Alfio in the future!"

I was not too pleased to hear that my daughter doesn't have too much milk and Lia doesn't digest her milk too well. So, now after nursing her Lala adds some sterilized cow's milk. Doctor says that because of this, she has eczema on her scalp.

However, my daughter gave me the good news by saying, "I feel very good in the family and I think that Mamma and Babbo like me too." After the childbirth Mamma didn't allowed her to even wash the dishes for forty days. It seems that she is slowly learning the rules and the customs of her new family but Giulio's mother was surprised many times about our customs and about Lala's homemaking skills.

Lala hopes that when she will speak Italian better, she shall find work for herself because they need to have their own apartment, but for now they have no choice but to stay with the family.

Most of all I was glad to hear that everything was fine in her relationship with her husband, as she wrote: "With Giulio we are even crazier about each other then in the past. He pampers me very much. I think that a husband should be more severe."

Of course, she is fearing and worrying about me with 'our cousins' being here and tells me, "I always pray God to help you and to give you strength to overcome our separation," but she hopes to embrace me in her home. She writes that Giulio as usual is an optimist and is sure to see me soon, "But I am like you—the pessimist. However, after everything went for us like we hoped for, I have more hope that everything shall also end well for you… I think that your destiny shall be decided suddenly in one week, as it was with us."

I was happy to receive Lia's first kiss to her Baba and that Lala feels more cheerful after receiving my two letters with good news about my health.

There were nice additions at the end of the letter. Especially one stating, "We remember Rufin and Lidia every day and our little Lia will remember them always in the future, because they helped her to have a father and the family."

On the other side of the page was a letter[15] from Giulio written also in French:

> Our dear Maman, After having waited and almost lost hope, we finally received your first letter on January 28; now we are more tranquil and most of all happy to know about your good

health. During all this time that we were without news from you, we thought about the worst thing, that you departed with 'our cousins' and, therefore, we didn't write to you any more. After the two days… we received your second letter. Now Lala and I feel guilty about being lazy and not writing to you more often.

Maman, we read your letters many times from the beginning to the end, and our memories go back to the past, the time when you were near and were taking care of your children.[16] At that moment we feel how much gratitude and affection we owe you.

Well let's talk a little bit about Lia. To tell you the truth, I was expecting Alfio, but I am very happy with my little girl, whom I love and who is for me the most beautiful of all the others. In the evening, when I return from work, I walk in the room holding her in my arms, because she is very lively and doesn't want to go to sleep. Everybody in our home loves her and we are her slaves.

Lala is in good health and happy. The two of us are even closer to each other then in the past. She already speaks well Italian and begins to go out to shop in the nearby bakery.

I am placing in the letter one photo of Lia and another that I think you remember well which was done before our departure; after we will mail you some others, ours and of the little one. Please express our gratitude to Rufin and Madam Lidia for all the generosity that they had for us and now also for you. Tell them that we are waiting for their visit to Italy.

I am asking you to take good care of your health and to be cheerful, because we hope to see you soon.

Regards from my parents. My regards to Rufin and Madam Lidia. A big kiss to you. Giulio.

Because these letters were written in French I had to translate them to Rufin and Lidia. That evening after supper our conversation was dominated by the news we received and by the impression each of us had about different aspects in Lala's and Giulio's life. All three of us agreed that my daughter's life was very busy and she worked from morning until night.

Lidia noticed that mother-in-law was treating Lala well and that she and Giulio were remaining close to each other. Rufin commented that it was strange that they remained until now to live with Giulio's parents. I was happy that Lia was growing well, except for the problems of digestion and the resulting eczema.

And Lidia said in her sweet voice, "It looks like they are spoiling Lia. And who wouldn't love such a small baby."

Rufin, who himself liked to eat well, said, "They don't have a shortage of food and eat well."

Lidia added, almost not hiding her envy, "And Giulio is planning to have in the future a baby boy."

At the end of our exchange of impressions I concluded, "The important thing is that they are safe and far from the claws of the Soviets."

To this Rufin remarked, "In this little town you are also safe from the Soviets. They remained now only in the big towns and in the cities."

"It's true," I replied, "but those are not the Soviet Army units, those are the NKVD branches. You will see that slowly they would have their agents in the small towns too."

"Soviets will go home soon," Rufin contradicted me calmly.

"You are forgetting," I said, "that they annexed eastern part of Poland before the war. Now that they are here, they will never leave the rest of Poland."

Rufin raised his voice and replied proudly, "Now we have a new Polish Government of National Unity to which Soviets agreed—it means that this part of Poland will be an independent state and…"

"Rufin, please," Lidia interfered in our disagreement, "stop arguing. Nobody knows for sure what the Soviets will do. Only the time will show what will happen."

"You will see," I insisted, "they will never abandon what they have occupied. They will make sure that the new government in Poland is a Communist government as they did it in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania before the war. I can guarantee it—you will remember my words."

"Please, Pani," Lidia pleaded with me, "we cannot change anything by arguing." And she repeated, "Only time will show what will happen."

We remained in silence for some time. Then I said, "You know, now that I know more about the life of my daughter, I feel that she needs some advice from me on how to take care of Lia. I better write her a letter right away." And I began that evening to write. However I had so many things in my mind that I wanted to tell my daughter that I was adding and changing it so many times that I finished it more than a

week later[17] after I received from her one more letter.

"My dearest children," I began my letter, "you probably can imagine my joy when one evening I returned home from the market and Rufin gave me your letter. Now I am tranquil knowing about your life, that everything, thank God, is fine with all of you; most of all that the little one is fine and is growing well."

However, I was concerned if the eczema on her scalp was already healed and advised Lala to give Lia the juice of carrots and other fruits and wine. "It is too bad," I commented, "that you, Lala, are very poor nurse, because the milk of the mother is the health of the baby." But, I was happy that otherwise Lia was healthy, and that's what counts. Lala was also in good health and Giulio was in good mood. That's important and from it depended all the rest.

I was pleased that Lia loves the songs. It's as if she knew that her grandmother would like her to become a famous Italian musician or a singer. I told them that one should accustom her from infancy to music and I asked if they had a radio to make her listen to the Italian music and songs, as we have and listen to here.

Lia's photo delighted me but I complained that I couldn't see her face well because it was taken from too far. But she seems to be very gentle. I was interested to know all about my granddaughter and asked them to write if she resembles the father or the mother And I wondered when we could see each other.

About my health, I wrote, all goes as before; my stomach sometimes is better, sometimes not. The last time it was bad, maybe resulted from my work in the winter. "Could you imagine my figure on the road in the snow and rain? Well, it continues to be the same. Also I worry that my work now is slowing down, and it is difficult to make some money. I survived the winter, but how! My God, one cannot describe all that I went through!"

"When I am returning home alone from the market, I remember very vividly our returns with Giulio, all our conversations, and discussions... and I feel how much I miss you. With the tears in my eyes I automatically move toward my new home. There awaits me the supper, the warm room, and the bath."

At that time I ask myself if I have to be unhappy. Considering what happened to others, I have to say "No". But …"I regret that I cannot work for you; to help you in this difficult time and that later it will be too late."

I assured Lala and Giulio that I am making everything to thank Rufin and Lidia for their help. But I wonder for how long I could enjoy their hospitality. So, I look to find some other work, but it is very difficult—my Polish is not perfect yet.

I had the opposite opinion about Lala's and Giulio's hope to see me soon. I asked them, "How it would happen? This is an enigma that I am afraid to think about." Because to me it seems impossible and I see the black clouds on the horizon. I was hoping that they would understand my mood reading that some of 'our cousins' departed but lately arrived the new ones; and it seems that these would like to remain here. "We don't like their new visit." And I wondered, "When this is going to finish? It is hard on my nerves—you understand."

I expressed my gratitude to the parents of Giulio for having recognized my daughter as the member of their family and told Lala, "You should make everything to be worthy of this honorable and good family. Tell them that I am sending them my cordial greetings and infinite thanks."

Of course, as in all other letters, there were greetings and embraces from Rufin, Lidia and me to all and kisses to the little one. And I signed: "God bless you. Your mother."

Every day in the evening I read again and again the letters from my children and look at Lia's photo. I want to believe that everything goes well with them. But there were so many things that I wanted to share with them. So, only ten days later, on March 25, 1946, I felt in the mood and wrote another[18] letter without waiting for their answer.

My husband's fate was always on my mind and I asked Lala and Giulio for their thoughts. "Now that your destiny is decided, I think sadly about Papa. Where is he? Why he is not writing to you, he knows Giulio's address, but there are no news from him. Isn't it very strange?..I also think about Igor. Where is he? Is it possible that we shall never receive the news about him and his family?"

There was no answer from my father to my letter mailed to Slavyansk but, although I was placing myself in danger, I said that I will try to write once more to find out if my husband returned home.

Although my work was going very slow, I reassured Lala and Giulio that I was earning enough to pay for the food for the whole family; and, because from one day to another the food was becoming more and more expensive, we purchased flour, fat, and other products to have in reserve.

Then I added a short message to Giulio asking him to write how he considers his little wife as a

mother, and if she got used to take care of Lia. Also, I asked him if Lala proved to be up to his expectations, to his ideal. Or simply stated, "Didn't she descend yet from the pedestal?" And I thanked him very much for his tender letter and said that the memories about him will remain always with me.

I also congratulated them all ahead of time with Easter, "'*Khristos voskres!*'[19] and wished them more then anything else good health.

Then I wrote a few words to Giulio's parents:

> Dear Nonno, and dear Nonna.[20] I thank you very much for your kindness that you demonstrated to my daughter. I have no doubt that such good and gentle man as Giulio has the parents that are honorable and good.
>
> Dear Nonna, I am asking you very much to protect my daughter. Remember that she lost her parents and everything. And finding Giulio far from her Motherland she has to learn to keep the house and to take care of her little daughter. I don't doubt that Lala would be worthy of your family and of the new Fatherland. Ciao and kisses, Antonina.

In a few days after I mailed the letter to my daughter I had a big surprise. I remained at home to prepare something for my business but I had a presentiment on the evening before and I said to *Pani* Lidia, "Tomorrow I should receive a letter. And it really happened. That letter[21] was in the mail only a few weeks, this was a very short time compared to those I was receiving until now. Obviously, the mail between Italy and Poland was improving. This time it was again in German which Lidia and Rufin could understand and I read it aloud.

> March 3, 1946, Turin
>
> Our dearest Mama! Today is Sunday.. Everybody is already asleep. But my little Lia doesn't want to sleep and I have to dance carrying her in my arms from 6:30 in the evening.
>
> Poor little girl, she is very nervous and restless, because her little scalp is bothering her. In Italian it is called la crosta lattea.[22] It is not a serious illness, but she scratches herself all the time. The doctor said that there is nothing that can heal it and that it should purge itself. We lubricate her scalp with the olive oil and she wears the mittens attached with cording to her wrists. We are very displeased with this. But, I have only a trickle of my milk and the little one is on the powdered cow's milk that I receive for her from UNRRA nutritional aid center for children and pregnant women. Lia can already hold her small bottle and, all in all, she grows well. You can see it on her photo included in the letter. I hope that you received already the other one in the previous letter.
>
> The time is flying fast. The winter here is already gone by and very quickly. Now it rains hard and without end, like in the fall. It is raining the second day and it could rain the whole week. However, soon the spring will be in full bloom. I have to sew for Lia light summer dresses and let her be free from heavy clothing. She likes to be held in one's arms, listen to the song and always to be walked, and walked. This takes a lot of time.
>
> Life in this apartment is very uncomfortable. Domenico does not live with his wife. When we came here he was already staying with his parents. He has a very pretty little daughter. And it is too bad that she is living without her father. Sleeping arrangements are very inconvenient. Giulio sleeps with Domenico in the kitchen on a couch with the chairs added to it. I sleep with Mamma and Babbo on a huge bed in the bedroom. We hope that it will be possible to find soon some kind of apartment. But for this we must have a lot of money.
>
> The food here is good. The whole winter we had vegetables, fruits, meat, and wine. Naturally, all is expensive and we are going with money penny to penny (that's what Mamma who is in charge of purse strings is telling us).
>
> I began already to know a little about the City of Turin. Every Sunday Giulio and I go for a walk. Around the city are the mountains with beautiful panorama and the air is very healthy. It is too bad that all old trees disappeared; people did cut them down for heating during the war. But the City is very beautiful. Yes, the Alps I have seen very well on the border between Austria and Italy when we were transported on the trucks across the mountains. It was in the fall. And I had also seen the beautiful Prague—it was gorgeous!
>
> With Giulio we are always close and he never forgets to buy for me something sweet. Every Sunday we go for a walk or to the movies. One cannot ask him to be better then he is.

It is long time that I had no letters from you. And it makes me think that something bad did happen then I become restless. Since we left Laband, I received only three letters from you. When I receive them, my mood goes up. All the time you are in my mind and I worry about your life. This work at the market is already too hard for you; and any other you cannot do there. All the time I pray God to help you. Mama, you should also pray God to help you not to lose hope that time will come when we will see each other again and for you to know little Lia.

Why are you writing about mailing us a package and money? Think about yourself. Especially the money, they are impossible to exchange here. However, if you can find for me a dictionary whether it will be German-Italian, or Russian-Italian, or Russian-French, and also Russian grammar, it will be a big help for me. Here these books are very expensive…

Forgive me that my writing is not very accurate and with many mistakes. I am writing at night, being half-asleep, and forgive me that I don't write more often, but I am always thinking about you and weep.

The little Lia is kissing her Baba, uncle Rufin and aunt Lidia. We kiss you all with love. Your Lala and Giulio.

At the end of the letter there were many additions. The most important was from Babbo: "Regards from our whole family. With the hope to see you soon. Verro Ermengardo." And P.S. from Giulio: "I am including in this letter two photos with hope that the next time they will be better…"

After reading this letter together we discussed with Lidia and Rufin about the life of my daughter in Giulio's family and about little Lia's health.

Rufin emphasized, "You see, your daughter didn't receive yet all your letters that you wrote. This means that it is the problem with the international mail." I agreed with his reasoning.

Then I wondered, "How Lala could sleep in the same bed with her in-laws?"

And Rufin answered, "When Giulio and your daughter came to visit us and stayed overnight, all four of us slept in our bed. Probably, their bed is at least as big as ours."

I got up and went in their bedroom to see if it was possible for the three people to sleep on it comfortably.

Rufin jokingly asked, "Do you want us to go there and the three of us would try to lie on the bed, so you would be sure that there is plenty of room?" And he and Lidia began to laugh.

"No, it is not necessary; I see that it's possible."

Lidia, holding the photos of Lia and admiring her, said, "How lucky Giulio and Lala are to have such a beautiful little girl." And giving me the photo added, "Look how pretty she is!"

I also admired her photo and emitting a deep sigh said, "How I would like to hold her in my arms! I cannot imagine if one day it would be possible."

"Of course, it will be possible!" exclaimed Rufin. "Do you think that for the rest of your life you will be living with us? As soon as the life in Europe will normalize after the chaos created by the war, anyone will be able to travel anywhere, as in the good old days. We probably will travel together with you to Italy."

"Rufin, you are an optimist," I replied, "and I am a pessimist. But I wish that you are right."

"Of course, I am right," Rufin said with such conviction that I couldn't contradict him anymore.

On April 1, 1946 I wrote another very long letter[23] to my daughter.

I began by telling that I expected her to be a good nurse, because as a mother I had enough milk to satisfy her. Lia's illness worried me very much. Maybe the reason for it was deficiency in nourishment; therefore, one should improve it. I suggested, if it was possible, to give Lia the juice of carrots and naturally all other fruits.

Another advice to her was to stop thinking so much about me and to think more about her little daughter and most of all not to worry all the time. Because all her life should be dedicated first of all to the baby and then to her husband. Also I reminded her to take care of her own health, because happiness of the family depends from it. Her good mood is as sunlight for the whole family. She should always remember this and forget everything else. To look after the baby is a lot of work, one has to have patience and to be always calm.

From the few letters that I received so far from my daughter I learned a lot about her life and now I could imagine well her busy daily routine. I told her "That's why I regret so much that I am not with you to help you. And it is a pity that I cannot mail you some money. However, I didn't lose yet my hope to see you again; I know that I need to be patient and need to wait."

I thought that she would be pleased to know that on March 12, we had in our home a celebration to mark Lia's fourth month birthday. We had a glass of wine to the health of family Verro and to the health of Lia. The parents of Lidia, *Pan* and *Pani* Pietrowski, came also for the celebration.

"As you can see," I said, "we pass the time well and you should not make a tragedy that your mother is suffering and that she is unhappy. We are all relaxed, everybody is happy with me, all are esteeming me, and I know well how to recompense and how to thank for all that Rufin and Lidia are doing for me."

I explained that here it is Rufin who is the spoiled baby. If we would see each other, there will be a lot to tell about this family. When on Saturday we are all at home, I have the occasion to observe them well and I can say, "Happy is the husband who is satisfied with his little wife, and the wife who loves her husband who deserves it."

I mentioned that I met here on the market one Italian who said that he is a comrade of Giulio; in May he should depart home to Turin. He proposed me to depart with him, but there is a question, how this could be done. Also I know that at this moment one cannot even think about my departure knowing how crowded you are in the apartment. But I promised that if Lala need the shoes, I could ask the Italian to take them, as well as some books that she mentioned in her letter.

As about my learning the language, I told them that Polish is already my mother tongue and I am reading all the newspapers without difficulty.

I liked the photos they send me, especially the one with all three of them. But I asked Giulio to take Lia's photos closer so I could see better all of her features, her face, her eyes, her nose, her mouth.

At the end of April I received from my children another letter. One-half was from Giulio and the other half from Lala. Both were written in French. I read Giulio's letter[24] first:

April 3, 1946, Turin

Our dear Maman! Two days ago, after long time without any news from you, we finally received your postcard mailed on January 23, 1946. We understood from your writing that you also don't receive our letters, therefore, we shouldn't feel guilty. But it is very frustrating to wait with impatience every day and all for nothing.

You are asking my advice,[25] Maman, about the thing to which is very difficult to find an answer, because it is beyond our power; it's too soon to decide about when you would see us. We believe that after one year the world will be much calmer and there will be more possibility to find a solution. We can understand that the life is very difficult for you. We didn't forget the past and all fondness that we have for you. We ask you to try to have patience until it will be possible to see us again.

Our life is the same every day. Lala has a lot of work with the little one, but both of them are in good health and I hope to send you a good photo soon. Here the life is hard, but not impossible. The worst is with the apartment, it will be impossible to find one before the summer of 1947.

We are tranquil and happy that you are in the Rufin's home. Try to remain calm knowing that we always think about you. I am sending you many greetings and a big embrace. Many kisses from little Lia. Have a happy Easter. Give our regards to Rufin and Madam Lidia. Giulio.

The other half of the letter[26] was from Lala written on April 6, 1946.

My dearest Mama! It's because of me that this letter was not mailed yet. The whole day I am holding Lia in my arms. In the evening and at night I am sewing for her the summer dresses, because with the winter clothes is already to hot and she wants to remain free.

Her scalp is better, but the doctors tell that it is a good thing that she expels the pus and that she will feel better after. She is very little, her face is also small and fine, she resembles a lot to the little Boris Berezhnoy.[27] Her lips are like mine, and the eyes are petite and gray like Giulio's. She is very pretty and has a nice smile, and her eyes are smiling before her lips. She is not fat and very lively and vigorous. She gives a lot of work for me and for the whole family, but we all love her very much.

It takes a lot of my time to write in French, but I know that it is better for you. I think about

your destiny and your present situation. I hope that when the peace with Italy will be signed, it will be possible to make a request from the consulate to make you come here. And until that time you should try to improve your conditions there. We don't know how to thank Rufin and Lidia for their kindness to you. I pray much God for you and for them.

I wrote you before that on November 6, 1945 we had our civil marriage. Giulio had to run around a lot to make for me all documents [that needed to be translated] in Italian [and notarized]. Now our marriage should be valid also for 'our cousins.'

I can't write to my grandfather, because the mail is not going over there yet. Monsieur Demey didn't answer me yet. So, we have to be patient waiting to find out something about Papa.

Lia is sending her kisses to Baba and to Pan Rufin and Pani Lidia. The whole family sends their regards to all of you. I embrace you dearly and kiss you with love. Your Lala.

P.S. Finally, we have received your letter on April 12, 1946. We shall write to you again soon.

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1. Antonina G. Berezhnaya Gladky, letter to her daughter Olga and son-in-law Giulio [in French] Michalkowiche, Poland, November 29, 1945.

2. A French officer, ex-prisoner of war in Germany whom Antonina G. Berezhnaya Gladky met in a hospital in Laband where she was in an Ostarbeitern camp in 1943-1944.

3. Olga Gladky (Verro) letter to her mother [in French] Turin, Italy, October 17, 1945, private collection of Olga Gladky Verro.

4. Problems with his former fiancée. See the chapters "Chance, Destiny, or the Will Of God" and "The First Days In Turin."

5. Giulio selected the name Alfio for the baby-boy and Lia - for the baby-girl.

6. Antonina G. Berezhnaya Gladky, letter to her daughter and son-in-law [in French] Michalkowice, Poland, December 26, 1945, private collection of Olga Gladky Verro.

7. Giulio Verro, postcard to his mother-in-law, Antonina G. Berezhnaya Gladky [in French] Turin, Italy, November 14, 1945, private collection of Olga Gladky Verro.

8. Antonina G. Berezhnaya Gladky, postcard to her daughter Olga and son-in-law Giulio [in French]. Michalkowice, Poland, January 16, 1945, private collection of Olga Gladky Verro.

9. Ibid., January 23, 1945.

10. Olga Gladky Verro, letter to her mother [in German] Turin, Italy, January 27, 1946, private collection of Olga Gladky Verro.

11. See the chapter "Deportation of the Soviet Citizens by the NKVD."

12. Daughter of Maria Sergeyevna Litvinova, a childhood friend of Antonina G. Berezhnaya Gladky, also a co-worker of Orest M. Gladky in the printing house before and during the World War II in Slavyansk, Ukraine.

13. Bruno Zanobini, Giulio's friend. See the chapters "Italy Allies With Germany," "Italian Armistice," and "Chance, Destiny, or the Will of God."

14. Olga Gladky Verro, letter to her mother [in French] Turin, Italy, February 11, 1946, private collection of Olga Gladky Verro.

15. Giulio Verro, letter to his mother-in-law [in French] February 6, 1946, private collection of Olga Gladky Verro.

16. See the chapter "Becoming Entrepreneurs "

17. Antonina G. Berezhnaya Gladky, letter to her daughter and son-in-law [in French] Michalkowice, Poland, March 15, 1945, private collection of Olga Gladky Verro.

18. Ibid., March 25, 1946.

19. Christ has risen! [in Russian].

20. Grandfather and Grandmother [in Italian].

21. Olga Gladky Verro, letter to her mother [in German] Turin, Italy, March 3, 1946, private collection of Olga Gladky Verro.

22. Milk eczema - in Italian.

23. Antonina G. Berezhnaya Gladky, letter to her daughter and son-in-law [in French] .Michalkowice, Poland, April 1, 1946, private collection of Olga Gladky Verro.

24. Giulio Verro, letter to his mother-in-law [in French] Turin, Italy, April 3, 1946.

25. Advice about how long she has to remain to live with Rufin and Lidia.

26. Olga Gladky Verro, letter to her mother [in French] Turin, Italy, April 6, 1946, private collection of Olga Gladky Verro.

27. Son of Nikolay N. Berezhnoy.

Chapter 48

Letters Gave Me Strength

As remembered by Antonina G. Berezhnaya Gladky
Translated and Edited by Olga Gladky Verro

The letters I was receiving from my daughter and from Giulio, although not very often, were very important in keeping up my morale. Having their news was a great consolation and it gave me the strength to patiently wait and not to lose my hope to see them and my little granddaughter in the near future.

One thing was not clear, how long I would be able to remain in Poland before the Soviets nose out my whereabouts. I was living one day at the time, but at night I couldn't fall asleep from all kinds of scenarios I was imagining could happen to me.

Rufin and especially Lidia were very good to me during the six months that I have already lived in their home and they treated me as part of their family. They were a very happy couple and the life was peaceful in their home. The relaxed atmosphere and absence of tensions in the family were very favorable for my stomach that lately was not bothering me as much as it used to before in Laband. Rufin and I had long discussions that reminded me our discussions with Giulio, which I remember always with nostalgia.

We had a very festive Easter with Rufin and Lidia and the rest of the Pietrowski family: Lidia's parents, sister Wlada, brother and sister-in-law, and the two little nieces. On Easter Sunday we all went to church for a Mass and I was surprised to see how devoted the Polish Catholics are. The church was packed with people dressed in their best clothes and all prayed standing on their knees. I also prayed God to help me to have some news about my husband.

Lidia prepared festive dinner with the food she ordered me to buy on the market. We had a mutton roast with potatoes, also the Easter cake, compote with cherries, and wine. In the middle of the table there was a basket with the colored eggs, like we used to have in my native home when I was young.

With the Easter came also the spring and the warmer days for me to be on the market in Katowice, where I continued to do business and to earn my upkeep in the Rufin's and Lidia's home. I was trying to do all possible to show my appreciation for their hospitality and their respect, affection, moral support, and advice from both of them.

It was at that time that I received an offer to work as a governess for children and to live with the Polish family, but Rufin suggested waiting until I could find something about my husband. "If he is in Germany," he said, "sooner or later he will write to Giulio. Be patient."

And Lidia told me, "In May we will be going on a pilgrimage to the sanctuary of Czestochowa. You shall come with us and pray Virgin Mary to help you find out what happened to him."

I agreed to go with them hoping that my prayers would indeed help me either to find out something about my husband or to help me cope with the unknown.

At the end of April, 1946 I wrote a reply[1] to the last two letters from my children dated April 3 and April 6 which I received very quickly on April 26.

I was very happy to be informed about their life and told them, "If the distance in kilometers separates us, we remove it by letters being on time."

The health of the baby always worried me. Although Lala was writing that it was going better now, I felt it was my duty to give her my advice, "You should pay attention to the eyes and ears, maybe it is scrofula, and one needs to give her cod liver oil and the fruits." I wanted to know what Lia was already eating, if she was already drinking wine. I worried that little girl was probably without needed nutrition that comes from mother's milk. And I expressed my doubts that powdered milk was sufficient for growing up well and healthy.

I was glad that Lala described in details Lia's appearance. Looking at her photo now I was able to imagine her, but it was still not enough for me. I wanted to know more, about her hair, if it was black; if the forehead was large like Giulio's; and if her smile was like Giulio's as I remember it; and in what language

Lala speaks to her. I said that everything about Lia infinitely interests me and she always should write all the details of her life.

In our apartment house above the room where I sleep there was also a baby. And I wrote to Lala that when during the night and in the morning I can hear him crying I always think about the little Lia and imagine that her mother takes her in her arms and walks with her in the room.

I wrote that I was worrying how long I may remain at Rufin's home and was guessing that my departure could be very long time from now. I wondered about the time when they will tell me that it is enough. After all, it is not so pleasant to have with you one person who has nothing to do with your family.

However, I reassured my daughter that until now every thing is going well, because I work exclusively for the whole family; to give us the possibility to live, and to live well—to have butter, lard, meat and all other products. "But what will be after?" I asked. "This 'after' makes me think very much about my future. If, for instance, I would be able to make something for my departure to join you, then there is the question about your apartment that I understand well."

I mentioned that I was also thinking to find another work, but for my age it was difficult. Therefore, it remained for me only to wait and to have patience, and of the last one I possessed a lot.

I felt that the essential thing at that time was that my children are already in the home, but I suggested that their task now was to look for an apartment, to extricate themselves from the family. This was their need. "Dear Giulio," I wrote, "excuse me that I am giving you advice, for you it is better to see how it should be done, but it is the right of the parents to give an advice to their children. Isn't it?"

I informed Lala that I found for her all the books that she asked me for, but to mail them was impossible. Therefore, today I decided to send the Dictionary through one Italian that I described before.

I asked my daughter how did they celebrated Easter and described that we had everything that is required by the tradition: hem, meat, butter, cake, wine, and also candies. We had company and made photos of the three of us and me alone. On Easter morning I went to the church. It was very solemn, and they were singing very good 'Alleluia.'

Oh, yes, I told her that I would like also to know if they have baptized Lia, because until now they didn't write anything about it.

I also told her to write what she needs and I would send it to her, if I find an occasion through someone going to Italy.

After writing this letter I decided to wait for the answers from my daughter and maybe from Giulio. I was in a good mood. After Easter, everything was going well. Spring had arrived, the sun was warming up, and in my work at the market all the problems of the winter were already forgotten.

In May, Lidia and Rufin were planning to have a pilgrimage to the sanctuary in Czestochowa and I was invited to join them.

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1. Antonina G. Berezhnaya Gladky, letter to her daughter and son-in-law [in French] Michalkowice, Poland, April 29, 1946, private collection of Olga Gladky Verro.

Chapter 49

Praying For A Miracle

As remembered by Antonina G. Berezhnaya Gladky
Translated and Edited by Olga Gladky Verro

On May 10, 1946 we got up very early in the morning to catch the first train going in the direction of Czestochowa. Rufin and Lidia, who had made this pilgrimage for many years, knew all the details about the sanctuary. During our trip they recounted to me its story.

The old monastery was located about a hundred miles by rail from Katowice. As we boarded the early train, it was already packed with pilgrims and many of them were handicapped and sick. Lidia explained that everybody was anxious to arrive early at the old monastery to find a place close to the wall where the picture of Our Lady of Czestochowa was shown to the believers.

The ancient fortified Monastery of Czestochowa[1] was located on the slope of the hill called Yasna Gora, and to reach it from the railroad station we had to walk up the hill on a wide path. Along the path were many small shrines of wood or stone. These shrines were composed of pillars and on top of them were placed statues of the Virgin Mary or the crosses. There, the tired pilgrims would stop to rest and to pray. As we slowly walked up, we also had to rest several times.

It was a clear and bright spring morning, making our trip more enjoyable. On our way up, Rufin told me that the picture of Our Lady of Czestochowa was an antique Catholic shrine in Poland dating back to the Middle Ages and the Monastery was a very famous place of pilgrimage for devout Polish Catholics and those
seeking a miracle to heal afflictions of their bodies or souls.

As we entered the Monastery we could only hear the hollow hum of the human voices, because it took a while for our eyes to get used to the darkness inside and to see that there was already a multitude of people who occupied the best places near the dark wall. Some were standing with or without the help of canes or crutches, others were sitting on the old wheelchairs or on the primitive wooden carts, and some were lying on the handheld stretchers placed on the floor.

As I observed this pitiable collection of people, I could see some of them and the others I could only guess their afflictions. Some were blind, others were lame, some had missing or mutilated limbs, or were crippled or maimed in various parts of the body, and still others were obviously very sick and moaned in great pain. But all waited patiently for the miraculous Black Madonna to appear on the big wall.

After a while our eyes adjusted to the faint light filtering through the small high windows, and I saw that the walls were covered by gold and silver miniature replicas of arms, legs and other parts of the human body. Rufin explained that they were gifts from crippled pilgrims to remain there as testimony, or as relics, for their miraculous healing.

Finally, a diffused light illuminated the dark wall and the image of the Black Madonna slowly began to appear in one spot. Those pilgrims who were able knelt on the cold stone floor, and all began to pray for the miracles they came to ask to be healed from, their afflictions, illnesses, handicaps, or whatever else they hoped that the Virgin Mary would help them with.

Lidia and Rufin were praying fervently for a miracle to have a baby. I was praying to help my daughter and Giulio to be successful in finding an apartment and implored for a miracle that my husband was alive and was somewhere in a part of Germany occupied by the Americans or English.

We returned from the pilgrimage tired in our bodies, but light in our souls. A desire and hope for a miracle somehow elevated our spirit and we felt liberated from the heavy burden we brought with us to the sanctuary.

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1. Julian Popescu, *Let's Visit Poland* (London: Burke Publishing, Pegasus House, 1984) pp. 79-80.

Chapter 50

First Letters From My Father

By Olga Gladky Verro

At the end of April, 1946 Giulio came home for lunch and brought the mail from the mailbox located on the ground floor of the apartment building. One of the letters was from Germany and was addressed to Madam and Monsieur Verro. He guessed that it could be for him and me but then it should have been from Monsieur Demey from France not from Germany. He asked his mother if they had anybody who could write to them from that country.

"Maybe someone who knows your father," she replied.

"Than we better wait for him before opening the letter, Giulio decided. "I don't want him to get upset—it could be addressed to him and you."

So, we impatiently waited for Babbo to arrive home for lunch. He opened the letter and handed it to Giulio saying, "You read it. It's written in foreign language."

And indeed the letter was addressed to Giulio's parents.[1] As Giulio was reading it aloud in French and translating it in Italian for his parents, I screamed, "My father is alive! My father is alive!" and tears poured on my cheeks.

April 11, 1946 [Weinheim]

Honorable Madam and Monsieur Verro,

On January 1945 your son Giulio remained in Laband with my family. Maybe you have some news from your son or maybe he returned home [from Germany]. I implore you, if you have news from him about my family, please let me know as soon as possible because I am very worried about their destiny.

I thank you in advance. With high regards, Orest Gladky.

My address: An Herrn Dmitry Tschiabrischvili, Lindenstrasse, 11

Weinheim, A.D. Bergstrasse, Germany.

Giulio embraced me and held me close until I calmed down telling me in French, "My dear, if he is in Germany, he was successful in getting away from the Soviets.

"Very good news for you, Lala," said his mother.

"Indeed, the good news," commented his father. Then in his usual authoritative manner added, "If the mail from Germany had started and it took less than two weeks for the letter to arrive here, it means that the times are becoming normal." Then he requested with impatience "Let's eat, I have to go back to work on time."

Since the letter wasn't written in my father's handwriting, Giulio and I guessed about the address and who could be this Dmitry Tschiabrischvili. Also, we wanted to find out how far the town of Weinheim was located from the Soviet occupied part of Germany.

I said, "I will reply right away tonight giving my father the good news about us. But I will be very cautious in giving details about my mother's situation until I know more about my father's circumstances there."

That evening, after we finished the supper and washed the dishes, I felt justified not to join my mother-in-law in the usual evening chores of mending socks. I sat right away to write a letter to my father. It was impossible to describe in the first letter to my father all that happened to us during more than one year since he left us on January 22, 1945 in Laband.[2] I tried to reassure him that we were all in good health and to inform him on the most important events in our lives.

I entrusted the letter to Giulio to mail it in the morning. Regrettably, when Giulio came home for lunch he brought the letter back because the Post Office didn't accepted yet mail for Germany. And my letter had to wait to be mailed until May 15 when finally the mail from Italy to Germany was resumed.

April 26, 1946, Turin, Italy

Our dear Father and Grandfather![3]

I almost died from joy when I received your letter today. We have already lost hope to hear anything about you, but God sees it better. …You could imagine what day of happiness it was for me, Giulio, and for all Verro's family when we received your letter. Only your little granddaughter Lia couldn't understand why we were so happy.

All the time we were without you in Laband. we were materially provided; we had a roof, a warm place, and food and we worked for our "brothers."

In October 1945 we left Mama [in Poland] and in thirteen days arrived in Turin. On November 12 was born our little daughter Lia. …Now she is beginning to walk and to mutter her first "Mam-ma." Time flies—on June 12 my little daughter will be seven months old.

Mama is living with a Polish family …of Giulio's good friend. They respect her and treat her well but she is not a burden for them because Mama knows how to justify her presence. From her letters is clear that she feels good being there, also, her health is fine. We regret that Mama couldn't come with us, because even I obtained with great difficulties the permission to come with my husband. Do you think it would be possible for Mama to meet with you? It would be a real happiness!

Now a little bit about me. We live not too bad. It was good fortune that Giulio received his previous job as soon as he returned home. We are poor but have enough money to feed ourselves and our stomachs are never empty. We live with his family in a crowded but hospitable place—it is hard to find the apartments. But finally we have no worry.

I think that you wouldn't want to have a better husband for me than Giulio. We are happy; and my daughter has a very good father. Mama was very pleased with my husband. How about you?

Now, my dear, about you. From your letter I understood only about the place where you are now. But this is not enough. I will be waiting with impatience all the details of your present, past, and future. Please, write as quickly as possible especially about your health, your situation there, and where is Igoryek?[4]

Antonina Yulyevna with children and Babushka departed "home" in October. Until the last moment all were in good health and not hungry. [Igor's son] Igor is a beautiful baby. …It's a pity if we couldn't see him anymore.

I will write all the details after I receive your answer. Giulio remembers very well January 22, 1945 and your words, "Take care of Lyalya."

We are mailing you our Easter photo. In the future you will receive more. Mama took care of this and before our departure compelled Giulio to buy a camera.

The whole [Verro] family sends you their warm-hearted greetings. Your granddaughter who has a temperature with her first teeth sends you her "Ciao!" and kisses her "Dyed" Orest. Giulio and I embrace and kiss you dearly. We are waiting impatiently news from you. Yours Lyal'ka.[5] "Beacoups de salut et un grand bais.[6] Giulio."

P.S. May 14, 1946. Finally, I am able to send you the answer with the first mail [from Italy] to Germany. I hope that now mail with Germany will be stabilized and we will be able to be close with our souls and minds. Yesterday I received a letter from Mama mailed on April 1. Everything is well with her. I will mail your address to her immediately.

Days and weeks were passing by without answer from my father and I was not sure if the mail with Germany was going smoothly and that all the letters were arriving at their destination. Therefore, on June 2, 1946 I mailed the second letter[7] to my father with similar content and explained.that I am mailing it just in case he would not receive the first one. I added that I wrote immediately to Mama the news that he is in Germany and mailed her his address.

It was a long waiting for a reply from my father. Each day Giulio was coming for lunch and shaking his head, "No, there is nothing in the mail box." Finally, almost at the end of July Giulio entered the kitchen holding the envelope and embraced me. Finally, it was my father's letter.[8] While everybody was eating lunch, I read the very long letter translating here and there important news, some in French, some in Italian.

June 5, 1946. Wainheim.

My joy, my life, my happiness! Dearest Olya! Good, nice Giulio! My tiny Lia!

Can I write?... Where is Mama?... What is happening to her?... My dearest child, I cannot even write. You want the details—I am alive. Today I'm happy! Because you and Mama are alive! But Mama?... Who can guarantee that tomorrow she would be alive? Who will help us to pull her out from the hands of death? You see, my dearest child, only I should pay for all of your sufferings, because it was I who condemned you to this horror... Merciful God, grant you happiness and health and keep the days of your life away from darkness and sorrow, only then would I partially regain my peace.

I have thought about the misfortune that befallen on all of us; I was pursued by imagining your reproaches, your imprecations; I was hearing your last hour shouts; I already saw you covered with blood... And I thought that for my transgressions toward you, as the Cain, I would not find place on this small and crowded earth... Forgive me, my dearest, for I committed toward you and Mama such transgressions that could be expiated only by your forgiveness ensuing from you being finally free and happy.

First of all, you should write me everything about Mama, all that you know, all that is necessary. You can imagine what I am going through now. I am resurrected. But now how to rescue Mama? Is this possible?

About us, I can say very shortly—Igor is always with me, or better, I am with him since January 22, 1945 when we left Laband. For several days we made up to 35-40 kilometers by foot, always encountering front line. Only in Dresden we felt relatively safe. We passed through Langensaltz, about 40 km after Erfuhrt, where were Igor's "acquaintances" [a code word for Folksdeutsche], but we couldn't make arrangements to stay in that camp. They [the authorities] wanted to send us "home." Idiots! Only in Dresden we were able to convince those idiots that they are crazy and remained there.

In February we were moved to a small town of Waldheim, about 40 km from Chemnitz. There we were stationed in a camp until the arrival of Soviets. With great difficulty we broke free and accomplished 1600 km march: to Fald, Koblentz, then returned to Frankfurt; went up north to Gessen, and from there back south to Augsburg; and then, to Mannheim; from there about 20-25 km to the home of my friend Tschiabrischvili who lives in Weinheim.

On September 14, 1945 we got into a DP (Displaced Persons), camp of forcefully deported. There we lived through various frightful experiences with the Soviets that thank to God, concluded safely. Here I didn't hide anything, as I had to do in Germany before. It was too bad that I had to declare that all my documents were perished during the bombardment and birth certificate from Stanislavov or Sosnovice weren't saved. Now I have received some kind of DP documents in which I am listed: Polish (Stateless).[Giulio and I understood that he had to change his true identity to prevent being deported back "home".]

We live with uncertainty. There are rumors that in our UNRRA (an international organization that takes care of the forcefully deported who couldn't return to their fatherland) there is a disposition about sending us to England or South America. They say that in general DPs (that's us) will not remain in Germany during this winter. But our ordeal is not yet over—that's my conclusion. Trouble could yet arrive unexpectedly because not only the UNRRA cares about us, but also "our dear Father" [Stalin] who does everything possible to return all of us "home" to our mother country.

I suffer, of course, because we, the Ukrainians, have lost everything: Poland is resettling us behind River Bug and we don't want to go to the Soviets. We have lost our homeland. But Igor is very calm.

In the beginning of our residency in the camp we were working transporting firewood to the camp—I did it for a short time because I couldn't physically do it after our long journey (from 1,600 km we made by foot 1,000 and 600 by train). After that, until February 1946 we did nothing; and from February until now I work in our Ukrainian labor office. Igor is also working in the housing office. We are clothed, fed, and Igor and I have a room (we can say two, because the other one is empty).

Here I encountered Pyotr Pyetrovich and Valentina Alexandrovna Styepanov[9] with their little Yulya. They say that they received your letter in Leipzig, but they soon were bombarded and lost everything, our address was also lost. I visit them often. Of course, they were very happy that I have found you and they send you their heartfelt and sincere greetings.

In search for you I wrote to France and Switzerland, but until now there is no answer. I am

not giving you my camp address because they [the authorities] constantly are telling us about our departure. The address of my dear friend, Dmitry Zakharovich Tschiabrischvili, is for now stable. He, D.Z., is Georgian, a lawyer from St. Petersburg. He knew Lenin, Stalin, Trotzky, and others and he fought for the liberation of Georgia. He is an old immigrant from Russia and loves us Ukrainians. He is already 67 years old, but he looks young. Compared to him, I am an old man.

He read your letter before bringing it to me and shed a tear. He said that if the news had something unpleasant or bad, he would have destroyed the letter—it would have been better [for me] not to know it than to hear something terrible. He is also writing you asking to search for his compatriots. Maybe with the help of Giulio you can help him. D.Z. lives here with his wife; his daughter lives in Heidelberg with a child; his son is in the French Army. Until now they were not able to find their son notwithstanding that he supposed to search for them through the Red Cross.

Tell me, my dear child, are you tranquil about Mama? You have a wise mind, but please be also truthful and write me everything what you can. My life is in the unknown, my destiny - in time and space. Is it possible to get Mama out from there? My dear friend, D.Z., says that in one year we will be all together. But what you can tell me?

You know, you and Mama proved to be more farsighted than I. Before the war I was foreseeing better, but than I became blinded, and the concentration camp [in Makyeyevka] completely knocked me out the track, I ceased to be a [thinking] person. Only now I am beginning to get normal and to have a purpose in life after knowing that you, my happiness, are alive, knowing that Mama, my joy, is alive! God, preserve you for many years. God, grant us to see each other again!

Now about Giulio, dear, good young man, my son, who with his love not only saved both of you, but also got you out of danger. There is no limit to my joy. We often talked with Mama and I always had faith in his decency, his honesty, and his nobility.

Yes, I wasn't wrong. By loving you, in the crucial moment he choose to remain with you and he saved you, maybe risking his life, personal well-being, and his future. I believe that you are happy now and hope that your happiness will never leave you. God grant him health, as well as to you; God grant both of you happiness. My benediction will be with you always.

If they would send us somewhere, I will depart with an idea that, if there will be better place than where you are now and if it would be possible, to make you also come there later. But how this could be done with Mama? My dear child, how to get her out of there? Write me also about you. How you are formally documented and if you feel secure? Is everything all right? Write on the address of D.Z. because I don't know what is waiting for us tomorrow.

As soon as D.Z. received your letter, he immediately darted off, got on an electric train and in a half-hour delivered it to me. Now I am writing you in his home. Tomorrow morning I will be riding with him to Heidelberg to share with his family my great joy.

I hope, my dear daughter, that one day I also will be able to dandle my granddaughter. Please, look after her, cherish her, and bring her up even better than Mama and I brought you up. Alas! In our times we couldn't give you the most important thing, serenity. All things considered, you became a wonderful, good girl. Try not to make your little girl as nervous as all of us are.

I am mailing you my photograph—I am a real *Dyed* [an old man]. Do not expect my answer or a letter soon (maybe they will move us again somewhere). Be careful and watch your health, take care of Lia. Affectionate and tender kisses to all of you, my closest and dearest, my loved ones. I embrace affectionately you, Giulio, and Lia. And I am waiting impatiently the news about Mama. For God's sake, please write the truth about her. Papa.

P.S.: June 6, 1946. D.Z. tells me that I lost two [people] and found four. Yes, thanks to God. This Sunday I will pray to thank Him for having saved you.

I have plenty of free time and have written three plays and am finishing the other two, but there is no sense to publish them here because money here are worthless now or could be in the future. In the next letter I will write you some excerpts from my personal notes—my thinking about your destiny—you will understand in what kind of condition I was before. Now my whole world got upside-down. I want to ask you about so many things, would like to write so much to you, but it's impossible to do it all at once.

Once more I embrace you and kiss all of you tenderly. If you live with Giulio's parents,

don't forget to shake their hands from me and give them my regards. How they accepted you? Papa.

Inserted with my father's letter was a short note from his friend Dmitry Tschiabrischvili:

June 5, 1946 [Weinheim]

Dearest Young Mother, one has to be a great painter to draw a picture of me and mainly of your birded father when I gave him your letter. One had to be a great writer to describe what happened to your dear, sweet father. I can only tell that there is only one holiday in the year when one tells to the other, "Khristos Voscres!" But your grieving father didn't rejoice Easter, he was a walking corps. Now I shout: "Orest voscres!" And it was you, dear young mother and loving daughter, who made it happen.

Now to calm his heart he needs only the letter from your mother. At the same time there is also a resurrection for me—I am Georgian—here are living all kinds of nationalities—but I am one lonely Georgian remaining here because all Georgians have been transferred to Italy—probably not very far from you. It isn't home for me notwithstanding that I am an old, old immigrant—it is already 24 years that I left my homeland Georgia.

Tomorrow I am driving your father to Heidelberg to see my granddaughter who is as little as your Lia. Be well, with all dears to your heart. Dmitry Tschiabrischvili.

P.S. from Orest: "Olen'ka, try to decipher his handwriting—and this man is writing books! Papa."

In a few days after the first letter, we received the second letter[10] that he probably wrote just in case we didn't received the first one. I assumed this because there were many repetitions especially the questions about Mama and how to get her out of harms way from the Soviets, out of Poland.

June 9, 1946. Wainheim.

My darling daughter, my good Giulio, my tiny granddaughter! I congratulate you with a holiday—today is Trinity.

First of all, how is Mama? How she is feeling being alone? I can imagine it myself... If it were possible to get her out of there I would regain my peace. You know, there are people who are still coming here from out there. It is difficult but until now is possible. Could it be possible for her to write directly to me or it is not safe? I think that Mama would consider this herself. Maybe it would be better to correspond with her through you? You should think about it, too. You, my two wise women, you know it better.

Dear child, you are asking details about me, about my wonderings. It was very beautiful, very tiring, and very sorrowful, because you were not with me, because I didn't know anything about your fate.

After arriving here I got acquainted with some people and with a clergyman of a local Orthodox church. Already in February I have mailed search letters to Italy, Switzerland, and France. After that, I repeated the mailings of the letters through French Red Cross where a daughter of that old immigrant on whose address you are writing was working. Finally, on April 1, 1946, when the mail from Germany was finally permitted, I mailed it for the third time. Thank God, Italy replied. The other sources are still silent.

What I was thinking about your fate? On the day I had received your letter, I wrote in my notebook: "May 6, 1946. Would it be some day when I would find my dear ones, my loved and cherished?.. Only God knows..." And on May 4: "My hearth is bathed in blood at the thought of all the horrors that you, my dear ones, must endure! How I left you?! How I dared?.."

And on April 17 I wrote: "Tonya, physically nearsighted, but farsighted in life, capable to make right diagnosis and prognosis, if you didn't made a mistake also this time, you would be able to find the way in life for yourself and for our daughter. This way was also growing up Olya.

Even if their life was crippled maybe it is still possible for them to live. But, if my saint women both made a mistake?.. If Giulio's presence (who remained with them) wouldn't be of help but be harmful? Oh, how many terrible insults have to endure my wife and daughter!

In the end, death and damnation should go not only for those who use violence over their life, but also for me, father and husband! I want to guess, to know the fate of those to whom I am obliged with all my life, with my salvation from the death [escape from the Gestapo concentration camp]. Is it possible that life turned out that in recognition to my saviors I brought them suffering and death? All this is very

painful and is incomprehensible even to my brother."

And on April 12: "...Maybe I am a murderer of my family?.."

That's what my dearest daughter, what I was thinking all the time about you and Mama, that's why the heavy stone was on my heart. Now the joy is darkened only by Mama's fate.

I think that you will clarify many things for me and I would be able to rejoice even more. Write me about how you live.

What you mean by saying that you are "poor"? When I got married Mama and I were poor. But even in those very difficult times we were able to grow "rich." I think that it is difficult to talk now about the future because after the war everything is so shaky and unsteady that it's impossible to guess when our poverty will end. You have now tranquility; this is already richness. I don't have it yet—I am poor.

However, today my material situation is as follows: I am fed, clothed, have a place to stay under the roof, and I have work. What will be tomorrow, I don't know. But I say that God knows all. Would we remain here? Would they move us? Where? When? What is waiting us here? There? In any case, long presence here is absolutely not desirable because of the attention of some "acquaintances" [Soviets]. It is good that I found you and Mama. In case of our departure, we always will be able to re-establish contact. According to the last information, we should be remaining here for about 2-3 months. What happens further? That's so much about my future.

Pyetr Pyetrovich and Velentina Alexandrovna Styepanov whom I am visiting every day are sincerely happy about you. We are talking only about you. But I am completely resurrected; I don't have any more heaviness that was oppressing me every second. The tone of gloom has changed to major key. But I am not yet feeling in an optimistic mood.

How we live with Igor? In the morning I go to work, he is sleeping. I come for lunch – he is not there. After lunch he occasionally comes to read me [German] newspaper. I rest until 2 pm and then return to work until 5 pm. When I come for supper, Igor is not there and I go to bed. It is like this every day.

Today is a holiday and I went to church. At 1:00 pm returned home and did some cleaning and washing clothes. In general, we cannot organize to do our elementary chores together, which is very unpleasant. He is always irritated with me and we almost don't talk. He had sunk into neighbors swamp playing cards. This satisfies him and he is almost living there. God is the judge and we all are sinners. But it's very unpleasant to see him in that dirty swamp.

For me the hours go by very slowly, but the days and months go by quickly. But now I have at least possibility to talk with you. I am sorry that Giulio cannot be a party to conversation! I still remember his [limted French and German]: "Buon Jour, Monsieur!" "Schlafen." "Guten Nacht!" But then I was always very tired and had no strength.

Well, how are you, my little girl? Please, for God's sake, write me more often, don't wait until you receive my letters. You know, European mail now is barely moving. Of course, it is only the beginning. But in any case this may continue for a while. And you have plenty to write; you probably could not finish it all in one year.

Don't forget to search for the Georgians [for my friend D.Z.], if they are somewhere there. By the way, there could be also Lidia Prato[11] and maybe Nikolay with the family[12]. Yes, I remembered also about Zoya Litvinova. Poor girl, she probably perished because the town where she lived was destroyed in half-hour time and under its rubble perished thirty-two thousand people. But this is only my assumption because she could be in Belgium. It is very hard now to find out.

In the letters to Mama be careful in writing about me. But I don't know anything; therefore I cannot judge about it. Anyway, life has taught us a lot to know how to be cautious.

I heard that many people from Italy go to work in other countries. Doesn't Giulio have any intentions to travel anywhere for work? Of course, it is too bad that you live in the country that lost the war—it will be difficult. However, we don't know anything. I am not clear about anything now and cannot presuppose anything, but I think that if Lord will help me to settle somewhere well, then you could join me. Or maybe the time would come when we all would go back home. However, I don't have much hope that this last possibility could be in the near future.

For now I am worrying only about the fate of Mama. Only if she could have possibility to join me. That would be the best solution. I am asking you very much to write all the details about Mama, about how you lived, how you departed, how you live now. What it means the departure of Antonina Yulyevna [Babushka and children]"home"? Igor and I understand this in our way [that they were deported]. You

probably know something about it and can assume much more and with more certainty than we.

Write, my dear child, I am expecting with impatience your letters. How is your little girl? Is she healthy? Write about your life in more details.

I kiss you, Giulio, and Lia affectionately. Take care of yourself and your daughter. Your Father and Grandfather.

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1. Orest M. Gladky, Letter to Giulio's parents, [in French], Weinheim, Germany, April 11, 1946, trans. Olga Gladky Verro, 2004, private collection of Olga Gladky Verro.

2. See the chapters "The Soviet Army Is Advancing" and "Giulio Comes To Stay With Us."

3. Olga Gladky Verro, Letter to her father, [in Russian], Turin, Italy, April 26, 1946, transl. Olga Gladky Verro, 2004, private collection of Olga Gladky Verro.

4. Diminutive for Igor [in Russian].

5. Casual for Lyalya [in Russian].

6. Warmest greetings and a big kiss. [in French].

7. Olga Gladky Verro, Letter to her father, [in Russian], Turin, June 2, 1946, transl. Olga Gladky Verro, 2004, private collection of Olga Gladky Verro.

8. Orest M. Gladky, the first letter to his daughter Olga [in Russian], Weinheim, Germany, June 5, 1946, trans. Olga Gladky Verro, 2004, private collection of Olga Gladky Verro.

9. Friends we made when we arrived in Gernamy when we stayed in the Ostarbeitern camp in Dresden. See the chapter "Journey Toward the Unknown."

10. Orest M. Gladky, the second letter to his daughter Olga [in Russian], Weinheim, Germany, June 9, 1946, trans. Olga Gladky Verro, 2004, private collection of Olga Gladky Verro.

11. Wife of Nikolay Nikolayevich Berezhnoy, son of Nikolay Gavriylovich Berezhnoy.

12. Nikolay Gavriylovich Berezhnoy, brother of Antonina Gavriylovna Berezhnaya Gladky. See the chapters "Germans - Invaders or Liberators," "The War Comes Closer to Home," "The Beginning of the End of Occupation," and "Leaving Our Home."

Chapter 50a

First Letters From My Father

By Olga Gladky Verro

At the end of April, 1946 Giulio came home for lunch and brought the mail from the mailbox located on the ground floor of the apartment building. One of the letters was from Germany and was addressed to Madam and Monsieur Verro. He guessed that it could be for him and me but then it should have been from Monsieur Demey from France not from Germany. He asked his mother if they had anybody who could write to them from that country.

"Maybe someone who knows your father," she replied.

"Than we better wait for him before opening the letter, Giulio decided. "I don't want him to get upset—it could be addressed to him and you."

So, we impatiently waited for Babbo to arrive home for lunch. He opened the letter and handed it to Giulio saying, "You read it. It's written in foreign language."

And indeed the letter was addressed to Giulio's parents.[1] As Giulio was reading it aloud in French and translating it in Italian for his parents, I screamed, "My father is alive! My father is alive!" and tears poured on my cheeks.

April 11, 1946 [Weinheim]

Honorable Madam and Monsieur Verro,

On January 1945 your son Giulio remained in Laband with my family. Maybe you have some news from your son or maybe he returned home [from Germany]. I implore you, if you have news from him about my family, please let me know as soon as possible because I am very worried about their destiny.

I thank you in advance. With high regards, Orest Gladky.

My address: An Herrn Dmitry Tschiabrischvili, Lindenstrasse, 11

Weinheim, A.D. Bergstrasse, Germany.

Giulio embraced me and held me close until I calmed down telling me in French, "My dear, if he is in Germany, he was successful in getting away from the Soviets.

"Very good news for you, Lala," said his mother.

"Indeed, the good news," commented his father. Then in his usual authoritative manner added, "If the mail from Germany had started and it took less than two weeks for the letter to arrive here, it means that the times are becoming normal." Then he requested with impatience "Let's eat, I have to go back to work on time."

Since the letter wasn't written in my father's handwriting, Giulio and I guessed about the address and who could be this Dmitry Tschiabrischvili. Also, we wanted to find out how far the town of Weinheim was located from the Soviet occupied part of Germany.

I said, "I will reply right away tonight giving my father the good news about us. But I will be very cautious in giving details about my mother's situation until I know more about my father's circumstances there."

That evening, after we finished the supper and washed the dishes, I felt justified not to join my mother-in-law in the usual evening chores of mending socks. I sat right away to write a letter to my father. It was impossible to describe in the first letter to my father all that happened to us during more than one year since he left us on January 22, 1945 in Laband.[2] I tried to reassure him that we were all in good health and to inform him on the most important events in our lives.

I entrusted the letter to Giulio to mail it in the morning. Regrettably, when Giulio came home for lunch he brought the letter back because the Post Office didn't accepted yet mail for Germany. And my letter had to wait to be mailed until May 15 when finally the mail from Italy to Germany was resumed.

April 26, 1946, Turin, Italy

Our dear Father and Grandfather![3]

I almost died from joy when I received your letter today. We have already lost hope to hear anything about you, but God sees it better. …You could imagine what day of happiness it was for me, Giulio, and for all Verro's family when we received your letter. Only your little granddaughter Lia couldn't understand why we were so happy.

All the time we were without you in Laband. we were materially provided; we had a roof, a warm place, and food and we worked for our "brothers."

In October 1945 we left Mama [in Poland] and in thirteen days arrived in Turin. On November 12 was born our little daughter Lia. …Now she is beginning to walk and to mutter her first "Mam-ma." Time flies—on June 12 my little daughter will be seven months old.

Mama is living with a Polish family …of Giulio's good friend. They respect her and treat her well but she is not a burden for them because Mama knows how to justify her presence. From her letters is clear that she feels good being there, also, her health is fine. We regret that Mama couldn't come with us, because even I obtained with great difficulties the permission to come with my husband. Do you think it would be possible for Mama to meet with you? It would be a real happiness!

Now a little bit about me. We live not too bad. It was good fortune that Giulio received his previous job as soon as he returned home. We are poor but have enough money to feed ourselves and our stomachs are never empty. We live with his family in a crowded but hospitable place—it is hard to find the apartments. But finally we have no worry.

I think that you wouldn't want to have a better husband for me than Giulio. We are happy; and my daughter has a very good father. Mama was very pleased with my husband. How about you?

Now, my dear, about you. From your letter I understood only about the place where you are now. But this is not enough. I will be waiting with impatience all the details of your present, past, and future. Please, write as quickly as possible especially about your health, your situation there, and where is Igoryek?[4]

Antonina Yulyevna with children and Babushka departed "home" in October. Until the last moment all were in good health and not hungry. [Igor's son] Igor is a beautiful baby. …It's a pity if we couldn't see him anymore.

I will write all the details after I receive your answer. Giulio remembers very well January 22, 1945 and your words, "Take care of Lyalya."

We are mailing you our Easter photo. In the future you will receive more. Mama took care of this and before our departure compelled Giulio to buy a camera.

The whole [Verro] family sends you their warm-hearted greetings. Your granddaughter who has a temperature with her first teeth sends you her "Ciao!" and kisses her "Dyed" Orest. Giulio and I embrace and kiss you dearly. We are waiting impatiently news from you. Yours Lyal'ka.[5] "Beacoups de salut et un grand bais.[6] Giulio."

P.S. May 14, 1946. Finally, I am able to send you the answer with the first mail [from Italy] to Germany. I hope that now mail with Germany will be stabilized and we will be able to be close with our souls and minds. Yesterday I received a letter from Mama mailed on April 1. Everything is well with her. I will mail your address to her immediately.

Days and weeks were passing by without answer from my father and I was not sure if the mail with Germany was going smoothly and that all the letters were arriving at their destination. Therefore, on June 2, 1946 I mailed the second letter[7] to my father with similar content and explained.that I am mailing it just in case he would not receive the first one. I added that I wrote immediately to Mama the news that he is in Germany and mailed her his address.

It was a long waiting for a reply from my father. Each day Giulio was coming for lunch and shaking his head, "No, there is nothing in the mail box." Finally, almost at the end of July Giulio entered the kitchen holding the envelope and embraced me. Finally, it was my father's letter.[8] While everybody was eating lunch, I read the very long letter translating here and there important news, some in French, some in Italian.

June 5, 1946. Wainheim.

My joy, my life, my happiness! Dearest Olya! Good, nice Giulio! My tiny Lia!

Can I write?... Where is Mama?... What is happening to her?... My dearest child, I cannot even write. You want the details—I am alive. Today I'm happy! Because you and Mama are alive! But Mama?... Who can guarantee that tomorrow she would be alive? Who will help us to pull her out from the hands of death? You see, my dearest child, only I should pay for all of your sufferings, because it was I who condemned you to this horror... Merciful God, grant you happiness and health and keep the days of your life away from darkness and sorrow, only then would I partially regain my peace.

I have thought about the misfortune that befallen on all of us; I was pursued by imagining your reproaches, your imprecations; I was hearing your last hour shouts; I already saw you covered with blood... And I thought that for my transgressions toward you, as the Cain, I would not find place on this small and crowded earth... Forgive me, my dearest, for I committed toward you and Mama such transgressions that could be expiated only by your forgiveness ensuing from you being finally free and happy.

First of all, you should write me everything about Mama, all that you know, all that is necessary. You can imagine what I am going through now. I am resurrected. But now how to rescue Mama? Is this possible?

About us, I can say very shortly—Igor is always with me, or better, I am with him since January 22, 1945 when we left Laband. For several days we made up to 35-40 kilometers by foot, always encountering front line. Only in Dresden we felt relatively safe. We passed through Langensaltz, about 40 km after Erfuhrt, where were Igor's "acquaintances" [a code word for Folksdeutsche], but we couldn't make arrangements to stay in that camp. They [the authorities] wanted to send us "home." Idiots! Only in Dresden we were able to convince those idiots that they are crazy and remained there.

In February we were moved to a small town of Waldheim, about 40 km from Chemnitz. There we were stationed in a camp until the arrival of Soviets. With great difficulty we broke free and accomplished 1600 km march: to Fald, Koblentz, then returned to Frankfurt; went up north to Gessen, and from there back south to Augsburg; and then, to Mannheim; from there about 20-25 km to the home of my friend Tschiabrischvili who lives in Weinheim.

On September 14, 1945 we got into a DP (Displaced Persons), camp of forcefully deported. There we lived through various frightful experiences with the Soviets that thank to God, concluded safely. Here I didn't hide anything, as I had to do in Germany before. It was too bad that I had to declare that all my documents were perished during the bombardment and birth certificate from Stanislavov or Sosnovice weren't saved. Now I have received some kind of DP documents in which I am listed: Polish (Stateless).[Giulio and I understood that he had to change his true identity to prevent being deported back "home".]

We live with uncertainty. There are rumors that in our UNRRA (an international organization that takes care of the forcefully deported who couldn't return to their fatherland) there is a disposition about sending us to England or South America. They say that in general DPs (that's us) will not remain in Germany during this winter. But our ordeal is not yet over—that's my conclusion. Trouble could yet arrive unexpectedly because not only the UNRRA cares about us, but also "our dear Father" [Stalin] who does everything possible to return all of us "home" to our mother country.

I suffer, of course, because we, the Ukrainians, have lost everything: Poland is resettling us behind River Bug and we don't want to go to the Soviets. We have lost our homeland. But Igor is very calm.

In the beginning of our residency in the camp we were working transporting firewood to the camp—I did it for a short time because I couldn't physically do it after our long journey (from 1,600 km we made by foot 1,000 and 600 by train). After that, until February 1946 we did nothing; and from February until now I work in our Ukrainian labor office. Igor is also working in the housing office. We are clothed, fed, and Igor and I have a room (we can say two, because the other one is empty).

Here I encountered Pyotr Pyetrovich and Valentina Alexandrovna Styepanov[9] with their little Yulya. They say that they received your letter in Leipzig, but they soon were bombarded and lost everything, our address was also lost. I visit them often. Of course, they were very happy that I have found you and they send you their heartfelt and sincere greetings.

In search for you I wrote to France and Switzerland, but until now there is no answer. I am not giving you my camp address because they [the authorities] constantly are telling us about our departure. The address of my dear friend, Dmitry Zakharovich Tschiabrischvili, is for now stable. He, D.Z., is Georgian, a lawyer from St. Petersburg. He knew Lenin, Stalin, Trotzky, and others and he fought for the liberation of Georgia. He is an old immigrant from Russia and loves us Ukrainians. He is already 67 years old, but he looks young. Compared to him, I am an old man.

He read your letter before bringing it to me and shed a tear. He said that if the news had something unpleasant or bad, he would have destroyed the letter—it would have been better [for me] not to know it than to hear something terrible. He is also writing you asking to search for his compatriots. Maybe with the help of Giulio you can help him. D.Z. lives here with his wife; his daughter lives in Heidelberg with a child; his son is in the French Army. Until now they were not able to find their son notwithstanding that he supposed to search for them through the Red Cross.

Tell me, my dear child, are you tranquil about Mama? You have a wise mind, but please be also truthful and write me everything what you can. My life is in the unknown, my destiny - in time and space. Is it possible to get Mama out from there? My dear friend, D.Z., says that in one year we will be all together. But what you can tell me?

You know, you and Mama proved to be more farsighted than I. Before the war I was foreseeing better, but than I became blinded, and the concentration camp [in Makyeyevka] completely knocked me out the track, I ceased to be a [thinking] person. Only now I am beginning to get normal and to have a purpose in life after knowing that you, my happiness, are alive, knowing that Mama, my joy, is alive! God, preserve you for many years. God, grant us to see each other again!

Now about Giulio, dear, good young man, my son, who with his love not only saved both of you, but also got you out of danger. There is no limit to my joy. We often talked with Mama and I always had faith in his decency, his honesty, and his nobility.

Yes, I wasn't wrong. By loving you, in the crucial moment he choose to remain with you and he saved you, maybe risking his life, personal well-being, and his future. I believe that you are happy now and hope that your happiness will never leave you. God grant him health, as well as to you; God grant both of you happiness. My benediction will be with you always.

If they would send us somewhere, I will depart with an idea that, if there will be better place than where you are now and if it would be possible, to make you also come there later. But how this could be done with Mama? My dear child, how to get her out of there? Write me also about you. How you are formally documented and if you feel secure? Is everything all right? Write on the address of D.Z. because I don't know what is waiting for us tomorrow.

As soon as D.Z. received your letter, he immediately darted off, got on an electric train and in a half-hour delivered it to me. Now I am writing you in his home. Tomorrow morning I will be riding with him to Heidelberg to share with his family my great joy.

I hope, my dear daughter, that one day I also will be able to dandle my granddaughter. Please, look after her, cherish her, and bring her up even better than Mama and I brought you up. Alas! In our times we couldn't give you the most important thing, serenity. All things considered, you became a wonderful, good girl. Try not to make your little girl as nervous as all of us are.

I am mailing you my photograph—I am a real *Dyed* [an old man]. Do not expect my answer or a letter soon (maybe they will move us again somewhere). Be careful and watch your health, take care of Lia. Affectionate and tender kisses to all of you, my closest and dearest, my loved ones. I embrace affectionately you, Giulio, and Lia. And I am waiting impatiently the news about Mama. For God's sake, please write the truth about her. Papa.

P.S.: June 6, 1946. D.Z. tells me that I lost two [people] and found four. Yes, thanks to God. This Sunday I will pray to thank Him for having saved you.

I have plenty of free time and have written three plays and am finishing the other two, but there is no sense to publish them here because money here are worthless now or could be in the future. In the next letter I will write you some excerpts from my personal notes—my thinking about your destiny—you will understand in what kind of condition I was before. Now my whole world got upside-down. I want to ask you about so many things, would like to write so much to you, but it's impossible to do it all at once.

Once more I embrace you and kiss all of you tenderly. If you live with Giulio's parents, don't forget to shake their hands from me and give them my regards. How they accepted you? Papa.

Inserted with my father's letter was a short note from his friend Dmitry Tschiabrischvili:

June 5, 1946 [Weinheim]

Dearest Young Mother, one has to be a great painter to draw a picture of me and mainly of your birded father when I gave him your letter. One had to be a great writer to describe what happened to your dear, sweet father. I can only tell that there is only one holiday in the year when one tells to the other, "Khristos Voscres!" But your grieving father didn't rejoice Easter, he was a walking corps. Now I shout: "Orest voscres!" And it was you, dear young mother and loving daughter, who made it happen.

Now to calm his heart he needs only the letter from your mother. At the same time there is also a resurrection for me—I am Georgian—here are living all kinds of nationalities—but I am one lonely Georgian remaining here because all Georgians have been transferred to Italy—probably not very far from you. It isn't home for me notwithstanding that I am an old, old immigrant—it is already 24 years that I left my homeland Georgia.

Tomorrow I am driving your father to Heidelberg to see my granddaughter who is as little as your Lia. Be well, with all dears to your heart. Dmitry Tschiabrischvili.

P.S. from Orest: "Olen'ka, try to decipher his handwriting—and this man is writing books! Papa."

In a few days after the first letter, we received the second letter[10] that he probably wrote just in case we didn't received the first one. I assumed this because there were many repetitions especially the questions about Mama and how to get her out of harms way from the Soviets, out of Poland.

June 9, 1946. Wainheim.

My darling daughter, my good Giulio, my tiny granddaughter! I congratulate you with a holiday—today is Trinity.

First of all, how is Mama? How she is feeling being alone? I can imagine it myself... If it were possible to get her out of there I would regain my peace. You know, there are people who are still coming here from out there. It is difficult but until now is possible. Could it be possible for her to write directly to me or it is not safe? I think that Mama would consider this herself. Maybe it would be better to correspond with her through you? You should think about it, too. You, my two wise women, you know it better.

Dear child, you are asking details about me, about my wonderings. It was very beautiful, very tiring, and very sorrowful, because you were not with me, because I didn't know anything about your fate.

After arriving here I got acquainted with some people and with a clergyman of a local Orthodox church. Already in February I have mailed search letters to Italy, Switzerland, and France. After that, I repeated the mailings of the letters through French Red Cross where a daughter of that old immigrant on whose address you are writing was working. Finally, on April 1, 1946, when the mail from Germany was finally permitted, I mailed it for the third time. Thank God, Italy replied. The other sources are still silent.

What I was thinking about your fate? On the day I had received your letter, I wrote in my notebook: "May 6, 1946. Would it be some day when I would find my dear ones, my loved and cherished?.. Only God knows..." And on May 4: "My hearth is bathed in blood at the thought of all the horrors that you, my dear ones, must endure! How I left you?! How I dared?.."

And on April 17 I wrote: "Tonya, physically nearsighted, but farsighted in life, capable to make right diagnosis and prognosis, if you didn't made a mistake also this time, you would be able to find the way in life for yourself and for our daughter. This way was also growing up Olya.

Even if their life was crippled maybe it is still possible for them to live. But, if my saint women both made a mistake?.. If Giulio's presence (who remained with them) wouldn't be of help but be harmful? Oh, how many terrible insults have to endure my wife and daughter!

In the end, death and damnation should go not only for those who use violence over their life, but also for me, father and husband! I want to guess, to know the fate of those to whom I am obliged with all my life, with my salvation from the death [escape from the Gestapo concentration camp]. Is it possible

that life turned out that in recognition to my saviors I brought them suffering and death? All this is very painful and is incomprehensible even to my brother."

And on April 12: "...Maybe I am a murderer of my family?.."

That's what my dearest daughter, what I was thinking all the time about you and Mama, that's why the heavy stone was on my heart. Now the joy is darkened only by Mama's fate.

I think that you will clarify many things for me and I would be able to rejoice even more. Write me about how you live.

What you mean by saying that you are "poor"? When I got married Mama and I were poor. But even in those very difficult times we were able to grow "rich." I think that it is difficult to talk now about the future because after the war everything is so shaky and unsteady that it's impossible to guess when our poverty will end. You have now tranquility; this is already richness. I don't have it yet—I am poor.

However, today my material situation is as follows: I am fed, clothed, have a place to stay under the roof, and I have work. What will be tomorrow, I don't know. But I say that God knows all. Would we remain here? Would they move us? Where? When? What is waiting us here? There? In any case, long presence here is absolutely not desirable because of the attention of some "acquaintances" [Soviets]. It is good that I found you and Mama. In case of our departure, we always will be able to re-establish contact. According to the last information, we should be remaining here for about 2-3 months. What happens further? That's so much about my future.

Pyetr Pyetrovich and Velentina Alexandrovna Styepanov whom I am visiting every day are sincerely happy about you. We are talking only about you. But I am completely resurrected; I don't have any more heaviness that was oppressing me every second. The tone of gloom has changed to major key. But I am not yet feeling in an optimistic mood.

How we live with Igor? In the morning I go to work, he is sleeping. I come for lunch – he is not there. After lunch he occasionally comes to read me [German] newspaper. I rest until 2 pm and then return to work until 5 pm. When I come for supper, Igor is not there and I go to bed. It is like this every day.

Today is a holiday and I went to church. At 1:00 pm returned home and did some cleaning and washing clothes. In general, we cannot organize to do our elementary chores together, which is very unpleasant. He is always irritated with me and we almost don't talk. He had sunk into neighbors swamp playing cards. This satisfies him and he is almost living there. God is the judge and we all are sinners. But it's very unpleasant to see him in that dirty swamp.

For me the hours go by very slowly, but the days and months go by quickly. But now I have at least possibility to talk with you. I am sorry that Giulio cannot be a party to conversation! I still remember his [limted French and German]: "Buon Jour, Monsieur!" "Schlafen." "Guten Nacht!" But then I was always very tired and had no strength.

Well, how are you, my little girl? Please, for God's sake, write me more often, don't wait until you receive my letters. You know, European mail now is barely moving. Of course, it is only the beginning. But in any case this may continue for a while. And you have plenty to write; you probably could not finish it all in one year.

Don't forget to search for the Georgians [for my friend D.Z.], if they are somewhere there. By the way, there could be also Lidia Prato[11] and maybe Nikolay with the family[12]. Yes, I remembered also about Zoya Litvinova. Poor girl, she probably perished because the town where she lived was destroyed in half-hour time and under its rubble perished thirty-two thousand people. But this is only my assumption because she could be in Belgium. It is very hard now to find out.

In the letters to Mama be careful in writing about me. But I don't know anything; therefore I cannot judge about it. Anyway, life has taught us a lot to know how to be cautious.

I heard that many people from Italy go to work in other countries. Doesn't Giulio have any intentions to travel anywhere for work? Of course, it is too bad that you live in the country that lost the war—it will be difficult. However, we don't know anything. I am not clear about anything now and cannot presuppose anything, but I think that if Lord will help me to settle somewhere well, then you could join me. Or maybe the time would come when we all would go back home. However, I don't have much hope that this last possibility could be in the near future.

For now I am worrying only about the fate of Mama. Only if she could have possibility to join me. That would be the best solution. I am asking you very much to write all the details about Mama, about how you lived, how you departed, how you live now. What it means the departure of Antonina Yulyevna

[Babushka and children]“home”? Igor and I understand this in our way [that they were deported]. You probably know something about it and can assume much more and with more certainty than we.

Write, my dear child, I am expecting with impatience your letters. How is your little girl? Is she healthy? Write about your life in more details.

I kiss you, Giulio, and Lia affectionately. Take care of yourself and your daughter. Your Father and Grandfather.

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1. Orest M. Gladky, Letter to Giulio’s parents, [in French], Weinheim, Germany, April 11, 1946, trans. Olga Gladky Verro, 2004, private collection of Olga Gladky Verro.
2. See the chapters “The Soviet Army Is Advancing” and “Giulio Comes To Stay With Us.”
3. Olga Gladky Verro, Letter to her father, [in Russian], Turin, Italy, April 26, 1946, transl. Olga Gladky Verro, 2004, private collection of Olga Gladky Verro.
4. Diminutive for Igor [in Russian].
5. Casual for Lyalya [in Russian].
6. Warmest greetings and a big kiss. [in French].
7. Olga Gladky Verro, Letter to her father, [in Russian], Turin, June 2, 1946, transl. Olga Gladky Verro, 2004, private collection of Olga Gladky Verro.
8. Orest M. Gladky, the first letter to his daughter Olga [in Russian], Weinheim, Germany, June 5, 1946, trans. Olga Gladky Verro, 2004, private collection of Olga Gladky Verro.
9. Friends we made when we arrived in Gernamy when we stayed in the Ostarbeitern camp in Dresden. See the chapter “Journey Toward the Unknown.”
10. Orest M. Gladky, the second letter to his daughter Olga [in Russian], Weinheim, Germany, June 9, 1946, trans. Olga Gladky Verro, 2004, private collection of Olga Gladky Verro.
11. Wife of Nikolay Nikolayevich Berezhnoy, son of Nikolay Gavriylovich Berezhnoy.
12. Nikolay Gavriylovich Berezhnoy, brother of Antonina Gavriylovna Berezhnaya Gladky. See the chapters “Germans - Invaders or Liberators,” “The War Comes Closer to Home,” “The Beginning of the End of Occupation,” and “Leaving Our Home.”

Chapter 50b

The Cracked Jar

By Olga Gladky Verro, April 1946

That memorable Friday morning began with the usual chores that my mother-in-law and I did any day of the week, except Sundays. My mother-in-law went to the open market and to the bakery shop to buy the produce and bread for the day. I took care of my daughter Lia's needs first, feeding her and getting her ready for the day. Then I proceeded with the bedroom cleaning and dusting while I placed Lia on the small rug on the floor, hoping that she would sit and play with her toys. Instead, she was crawling on the tile floor and getting under the bed and dresser. I had to pull her out from there and plead with her that the floor was cold and if she didn't want to get sick she should remain sitting on the rug. Of course, being five-months-old, Lia couldn't understand my reasoning. Unless I held her in my arms or put her on the high chair, there was little that I could do—she was in the crawling stage. But the rules of the Verro household required that we, the women, finish all the morning chores, get the food ready, and the table set before the men would arrive for lunch at 12:30.

On Fridays we usually had fish, both for lunch and for supper. As in all working class families after the war, the housewives had to be thrifty. And my mother-in-law was able to cook economical meals to feed the three working men and two women. Very often she prepared good-tasting dishes from the salted codfish that, although it required more time to prepare, was the least expensive fish at that time. It required soaking in water for a full day and night and change of water three or more times before cooking. Then it was either fried and served with fried potatoes and green salad, or cooked in a sauce made with sautéed onions and tomatoes.

That morning my mother-in-law was nervous because she had a late start cooking. She was hurrying with the stove to have the right heat and get the codfish dredged with flour to be ready for frying in a big pan. When the olive oil began to sizzle she placed the codfish pieces into the pan and got out of the drawer the meat carving fork that had two long tines and long handle for turning the fish.

I helped her peel the potatoes and began to cut them. She raised her voice, "*Dio mio*, how many times I showed you the "right" way of cutting them for frying? They are too thick! Do I have to do it all by myself?" I was sure that I was cutting them just as I did previously, but didn't want to make an issue of it and instead said calmly, "I will try to cut them more thinly, Mamma."

After I placed the potatoes in another pan on the stove already hot for frying, I began to wash the salad and again she found an opportunity to reproach me that I hadn't changed the water as many times as she wanted. And again, I just changed the water one more time to keep her content

While I went on the balcony to shake the water from the salad wrapped in the towel, Lia was crawling on the kitchen floor. When I came back, I couldn't see her anywhere and got scared that maybe she sneaked out the door on the balcony. "Lia! Lia! Where are you," I called and began to look in the corners, under the sofa, and finally found her behind the sewing machine and under the cupboard. I pulled her out and held her in my arms, reproaching her for not sitting on the rug.

As I stood near the cupboard, I glanced casually through the glass doors at the good dishes and glasses that were stored there and were used only on festive occasions. There were also a few other treasured items that my mother-in-law was keeping from everyday use. Right in the middle on the bottom shelf stood a large glass jar that was given to her by somebody; it was made of a thin glass and seemed to be from some store-bought product, either honey or pickled vegetables. In about six months that I lived with the family I never saw it being used, but it was washed with all the other good dishes and glasses before Christmas as a ritual pre-holiday cleaning of the apartment.

Suddenly, I noticed a long crack on one side of the jar and tried to examine it from a different angle thinking that it could be a reflection from other items on the shelf. But, there was no mistake, it was a crack. Without thinking about the consequences I said, "Mamma, the jar is cracked."

"What jar?" she asked impatiently without turning her head as she was turning with the long fork the fish frying in the pan.

"The jar that you keep in the cupboard."

She turned sharply toward me and the cupboard and screamed, “What have you done? My beautiful jar! I preserved it for many years and you cracked it!”

“I didn’t touch it, Mamma, I just now saw it that it is cracked.”

But she rushed toward me pointing the long fork in her hand and continued to scream, “My beautiful jar! My beautiful jar! What have you done to it?!”

I saw the long fork pointed toward me and Lia in my arms and quickly jumped behind the table and sofa protecting my daughter’s head with one hand. Mamma followed me screaming and pointing the fork. Now I got really scared and without hesitation ran toward the door and out on the balcony. She followed me screaming and pointing the fork. I ran the whole length of the balcony and turned around the corner to the other side then quickly jumped into the door of the neighbor and shut the door behind me. Mamma didn’t dare to follow me there. The surprised neighbor asked me what happened. I was able only to say, “My mother-in-law… My mother-in-law…” She looked out through the door window and said, “She is gone in her apartment.”

After I told her what happened, she reassured me, “Don’t you worry, she wouldn’t dare to come here. You can stay here until your husband comes home.”

The young woman was from the region of Trieste, a region where the population was mixed—Italian and Germans. After the war Trieste was given by the Allies to Austria and the Italians were forced to leave. I don’t remember her first name because everybody was calling her just Triestina.

I stayed in her apartment until Giulio came home for lunch. Of course, he was informed by his mother with her version of the incident. He came all upset with his mother’s complaint about my unpredictable reaction to his mother’s “innocent” reproach for damaging her precious jar. I tried to explain to him that running after me and Lia in my arms with the pointed long fork was not an innocent reproach. That I was really scared that she could do real harm to me and to Lia. “Nonsense,” replied Giulio. “Grandmother would never do any harm to her granddaughter. Anyway I calmed down my mother and we can return home and to eat now—I don’t have much time before returning back to work.”

“But I never touched the jar and didn’t crack it,” I tried to justify myself.

“It doesn’t matter,” he replied, “There is no way to convince my mother otherwise if she believes that you did it. Just forget about it—I told her that I would buy for her another jar that is even prettier than the one she had. So, it is settled now and she would not bother you any more about it.”

We returned to the apartment where Babbo had already finished his lunch and was reading the *Unita* newspaper. Domenico had already left because he had a long trip in the streetcar to get back to work. We silently ate our lunch and I fed Lia, then put her to sleep. When Giulio left, I helped to clear the table and Mamma sat as usual for her after lunch nap before we washed the dishes and she washed the floor. We did our afternoon chores in silence and I talked only with Lia when she wok up after her afternoon nap.

For couple of days after the incident my mother-in-law and I spoke very little, only those things that needed to be said. I wished that I could get away from that place but there was no way to find an apartment for us at that time. I began to make short visits in the afternoons to Triestina and shared with her my frustration. She was a sympathetic listener and also shared with me her pain of being forced to leave her nice home and her possessions in Trieste and become a refugee in her own country.

My mother-in-law was suspicious of my becoming too friendly with Triestina and complained to Giulio that I was gossiping with a neighbor about family. But Giulio assured her that it was good for both of us—for her to have me out of the house for a while and for me to have a friend of my own age.

Chapter 51

Happy News About My Husband

As Recounteded by Antonina G. Berezhnaya Gladky
Translated and Edited by Olga Gladky Verro

After returning from Czestochowa, I was patiently waiting for a letter from my daughter. Indeed, at the end of May I received from her a letter[1] written on April 29, 1946. I could feel from the beginning of the letter that she was in good mood as she described that they had a nice Easter.

> …Here the winter is long gone by. Although it rains often, there are also beautiful days. People are wearing already the raincoats and light socks; sometimes for me is already hot. Easter in our family was very jolly. We had a lot of food: broth, boiled meat, sausage, roast, asparagus, spinach, three kinds of cheeses, white bread, and naturally wine (Vermouth and red wine), and we had also fruits (figs, oranges, and nuts).
>
> On the second day of Easter we had an outing on the slopes of the nearby hills. There, up on the beautiful meadow, we had our picnic supper. Lia was also with us, but she had to drink her milk. Naturally, the cost of these festivities was very high. And now we have to make strict economy.
>
> Lia's little head finally healed.[2] Only she has difficulty with her stomach. She doesn't digest milk to well. Therefore, she eats very little each time. She is already drinking from a cup and a glass. She eats very well and likes to taste all kinds of foods. She drinks every day fresh orange and lemon juice diluted in sweet water.
>
> But, nevertheless, she is always vigorous and lively. She sits already very well alone. She knows already well her papa, mama, grandmother, and her milk bottle. She takes pleasure in bathing, going for a walk, and she likes to lick plates, spoons, and meat bones.
>
> Lia is really little, like a doll. When we walk on the street, several times people have asked us, "Is she a doll, or a real little girl?" It is a great pleasure to have her, and we are very proud. She is smart for her age and witty. And how she likes to play! She has already many toys - two rattles, a rabbit, and a penguin. For Easter Lia had worn her first dress and little shoes, both made by me.
>
> Yes, it is already half-a-year we have been here and Lia in two weeks will be six months old. The time is flying fast. But Giul'ka[3] and I are even closer to each other and more in harmony then before.
>
> Mama, Giulio isn't happy you write to him always using the respectful pronoun 'You,'[4] it's time to call him simple 'you.'
>
> For Easter we ordered at the tailor shop a suit for me from the navy blue Cheviot[5] that we brought from home. Now is the new problem, the shoes. But slowly we will get everything.
>
> In May we heard from Bruno[6] that he is getting married. When he found out that you are staying with Rufin, he asked us to express his greetings to you, to Rufin and his wife.

At this point Lala interrupted writing to take care of Lia and she promised to continue tomorrow. And what a surprise was in the letter she wrote the next day, on April 30, 1946.

> Dear Mama, dear Mama! God didn't forget us! Today, with the first mail from Germany to Italy came also a short letter[7] from Papa! He had written in French to the parents of Giulio and is asking them if they have some news about his family.
>
> From his letter I only understood where he is, approximately 200-250 kilometers from the French border, close to the town of Mannheim. This letter was only two weeks in the mail.

But from Italy no mail is going yet to Germany. Too bad, I cannot give him right away an answer. It seems to me that he is working with Allies. You should try writing him. Maybe it is possible to mail it from Poland. But Papa is nearer to me then to you.

What a happiness, Mama! It's like in a dream. I think about how he was disheartened not knowing what happened to us, and I have to write him that he is already a grandfather. Try to write him; his address: "An Herrn Dmitry Tsciabrischwili, Lindenstrasse, 11, Weinheim, A.D. Bergstrasse, Deutschland."

I burst into tears and hurried to tell Lidia and Rufin the news about my husband. "He is alive and safe in the part of Germany occupied by the Allies! He managed to escape from the Soviets!" And we rejoiced together that my husband was alive.

Lidia commented right away, "Didn't I tell you to pray Madonna to help you to find your husband? And she did!"

Rufin was more practical and asked me, "Didn't you hear yet from your German women customers the rumors that German wives and children would be allowed to go to Germany, if their husbands live there?"

"Yes," I answered, "but my husband is not German."

"*Pani*," replied Rufin, "don't be so naive. Today you can buy any kind of documents; all you need is to find the person who can make them to your specifications. If your husband can send such documents to you, I will help you to find here what else need to be done to be allowed to travel to Germany."

"You are such optimist, Rufin," I replied. "But thank you for offering your help. I know that you have good imagination, but it's not so simple to do what you propose." But his idea remained in my head and I couldn't stop thinking how to put it in practice.

The same evening I wrote to my husband a letter in German. First of all, I wrote how happy I was to learn that he was alive and that he managed to reach the right part of Germany.[8] Then I wrote him that from October 1945 Lala lives in Turin, Italy, also in the right part of Europe. That she lives there with her husband Giulio and their six-months-old daughter Lia together with Giulio's parents. That Lala, Giulio, and I write letters to each other. And that today I received a letter from Lala with the news that Giulio's parents received his letter, in which he is asking them about his family.

I explained that Lala couldn't answer him right away, because the mail is not going yet from Italy to Germany. Therefore, she asked me to write him from Poland, where I live with the Polish family of Giulio's good friend. And I added that I was the only one in our family who remained on the wrong side[9] of Europe.

However, I heard rumors that wives and children of the German men would be allowed to leave Poland to join their husbands and fathers in Germany. For this they need to have official documents stating that their husbands are German, living now in Germany, their address, and place where they work.

I asked my husband if he could obtain such official documents about himself and, if he could, to mail them to me as soon as possible. I emphasized that, if I have such documents, I could try, with the help of my good friends here, to get on the train and join him. I concluded by repeating that I hoped he understands that in order to be valid to cross the border from Poland to Germany these documents must state that he is German, his address, and a certificate from his place of work.

I mailed this letter the next day hoping that my husband could make the required documents soon and mail them to me on time because there will be many German women and children traveling from Poland to Germany. I thought that I would be less noticeable in the crowd then traveling later with fewer of them.

Shortly after that, I received a letter from France from Monsieur Demey; he also wrote my husband's address. Rufin suggested to me, "Write again to your French friend and ask him again if it is possible for him to send you some kind of a certificate stating that you are French." Rufin instructed me and I wrote the exact text of how this document should be written. I explained that this document could help me to join my husband in Germany.

Now I had to wait for my husband's and Monsieur Demey's answers. I really didn't much believe that this bizarre scheme could work, but Rufin was convinced that this was the best opportunity for me to cross the German border.

And Lidia told me again, "You see, *Pani*, the Virgin Mary of Czestochowa heard your prayer. She is

opening for you the road to join your husband."

Right away I wrote a letter[10] to my daughter and Giulio.

May 29, 1946 [Michalkowice, Poland]

My dearest children, I am finally writing an answer to your last letter. …The news about Papa was a great joy and a big surprise because I had no hope to receive news about him. Luckily the mail from here is already going to Germany and I wrote him the next day. I described to him some details of your life and mine. I explained that he couldn't receive the letters from you yet, but that you are receiving his letters. Lala, could you send his letter to me?

…About me, there are no changes, except one. It was the occasion to have a work in the home of an artist, as a domestic and to look after the baby. But Rufin didn't recommend it, he advised me to remain a little longer with them to wait for the answer from Papa. You know that the news about Papa had changed my plans. Before, I didn't have any other goal but seeing you. Now I think that I would also be useful for him, maybe to maintain his health. You know, Lala, that his health was not good.

In Rufin's family there are no changes, there are no babies and this is always their only sorrow. [Every year they make pilgrimage to holy places to pray for a miracle.] On May 10, we were at Czestochowa to pray to the Saint Mary of Czestochowa. It was very magnificent over there. I prayed for all my dear ones [and for the salvation of Papa.] I bought one little image of Saint Mary for Lia. I keep it always with me together with her photo. Now Lia is the most precious person for me in the whole world. Would I be able to see her sometime? I send to Lia endless kisses and hugs.

I wrote that "the last photo of Lia delighted me very much and" now I can represent her well. It semed to me that she resembled her grandfather when he was small. And I was sure that "for her age she has a very intelligent face, especially her eyes. In general, she looks very nice and so little, my God, so little." I wanted them to write all details about her health and development. "Is she still very vigorous? How much she weighs? Are you taking good care of her? You need to weigh her every day." I was worrying about her health and what was wrong with her stomach.

I have found all the books that Lala asked me and I mailed her the second dictionary and asked her if she received the first one, also to write me what else she needs.

As I waited for answers from my husband and from Monsieur Demey, I kept in touch with my customers, the German women, especially with those who were planning to join their husbands in Germany. From them I learned that reunification registration of German wives and families was done through the Catholic Church.

Rufin immediately went to his parish priest to find out what documents were needed and how it could be done to include me in this group. The priest promised to inquire from his superiors about it. Soon after, he told Rufin that this operation was still in the process of organization and it would take some time before the convoy train with the German families would depart for Germany. Meanwhile he suggested I wait to receive from my husband the documents I had requested and not to worry that the mail is slow—all German women were also waiting.

After this, a hope to join my husband was high one day and then the next day I imagined all kinds of obstacles and was losing my hope, especially because for a long time there were no letters from my husband. One thing that put me in a good mood was that letters from Italy were beginning to take less time to arrive. The last letter[10] from Lala I received in a record time of two weeks. She wrote again in German:

May 28, 1946. Turin [Italy]

Our dearest Mama! Dear Rufin and Lidia! Finally, I am a little bit freer and able to write a couple of words to you. Between May 5 and 12, we had a real 'bazaar' in our apartment. Giulio and Domenico installed a new electric fixture in the kitchen and painted the walls. After that we cleaned up everything in the apartment, washed clothes, and stored all winter clothing. The little one was very restless during all this confusion. We all were very nervous and moody.

On May 12, the guests arrived, Giulio's mother's aunt and sister. At our place only the sister stayed, aunt was with other relatives. But the hardest days were only until May 21. After

that, there was again much to wash, mend, and iron, because during the previous week we did not wash, except the diapers. Naturally, taking care of Lia I had an excuse to choose my chores.

Last week I mailed a letter to Papa. Now is already possible to write to Germany. How I am waiting for his answer! Hopefully, everything is all right with him. Mama, have you written to him?

Lia is already weighing 6,200 grams. Now she has a little bit of cold. She remains always small, vigorous and quick, but not fat. She calls already 'mam-ma' when she is wet or hungry. For more then a month I am giving her a pap made from flour roasted in the oven, or rice flour, or cream of wheat, or a soup of vegetables. She drinks the orange, lemon, and carrot juices. Last night she slept well the whole night. She recognizes all of us. And she is already a sly little fox and commands us all. But she is very vigorous and lively.

The last time I wrote you, I said that I was not happy about the problem with her stomach. She doesn't digest very well the milk. She always had this problem. She sits already well by herself and can stand up when I hold her little hand. And she begins already to walk. And how proudly she does it! I am hoping that she will love music since she stops complaining when one sings to her. Every time when she goes to sleep, one has to sing and walk holding her in one's arms. Giulio's turn is in the evening. The best amusement for her is to go outside for a walk. She looks everywhere, at the streetcar, people, and bicycles.

We would be happy when you could see your granddaughter. Here the whole family is crazy for her. When there is a nice sunny day she does not miss to be on the balcony. Every Sunday and on holidays we are going in the afternoon for a walk.

The City is very big and still beautiful, but many big buildings were destroyed by the bombardments. Almost all trees were broken the last winter and nothing remained on the streets from their beauty. To justify that people used the trees to heat their homes, they say here, "The cold (weather) is not an aunt who can warm you in her arms." And now everywhere the streets are naked. On one side of the town are the Alps Mountains, on the other side are the hills. But I have very little time to take a walk to see everything.

On May 25 Bruno got married. Too bad, they cannot come to see us, because he is attending technical school.

Mama, the seamstress made for me a new blouse and a dress from the silk with overall flowers design that we bought before our departure on the market in Katowice. Also the tailor made for me a suit from a cut for Papa's suit of navy Cheviot that we brought from home. For now I am wearing Giulio mother's shoes. If you can, send me number 36 and half [because] with the shoes there is a problem But we don't have shortage of food.

If I will be able to get a good job, in two-three years we would be able to get many things that we need for our home. We were lucky that Giulio was able to get his old job back; his pay is higher then in the other establishments.

With impatience I am waiting for news from Papa. I am hoping for the best. I am asking God to help you encounter each other again.

…Giulio was right to be afraid to take me home to his family. His folks are very strange and eccentric, they can see the black as white and the blue as red, and one should not argue with them about it. Well, I am trying to get used to them and hopefully they would try to get used to me…

…It is hard for me to write well in German, but I am hoping later to be able to write finally in R.[11] Now that I am learning Italian, I am quickly forgetting German. The most important is that you can understand the meaning of what I am writing about. Also, I am writing always at night almost falling asleep at the table.

It is already one month that I have my hands and wrists swollen from a flair-up of rheumatism.[12] It was good not to do some of the housework to help them to heal. But the new work that takes time to do is coming; I must prepare everything for the winter for the little one, the warm dresses, stockings, and the coat. We have already looked how much it will cost and everything is very expensive. And the next month I will begin visits to the dentist, I must find time to do it.

…But you know Giulio, when he has couple of liras in his pocket, he makes happy his Lala, he buys me something sweet. By the way, we are eating already the first cherries and

strawberries. Very expensive!

…How is your stomach, Mama? How is your work?

Mama, write me more often, it seems to me that you have little bit more free time then I. And what a joy for me to receive your letters and to know that everything is fine with you. And especially I am interested to know about our 'cousins.[13] Please write, write. Giulio will write to you soon.

The whole family Verro is sending cordial greetings to you, Rufin, and Pani Lidia. Lia is sending her Ciao and kisses. And we are kissing you with love. Yours Lala, Lia, and Giulio. Also, our greetings to Pietrowski family.

In the late spring of 1946, Lidia's mother got very sick and had to be placed in a hospital in Zabrze where she remained for several weeks. I was finding on the market the food that she could eat and Lidia was bringing it to the hospital; I visited her on Sundays. When she returned home she was convalescent for a long time. The whole family was deeply concerned about the poor health of their beloved mother. I was also very sorry to see her health declining. In the few months I knew her, I became very fond of this gentle and warm woman who accepted me as a part of her family.

On the market I met one Italian by the name of Giuseppe who told me that he will be leaving soon for Italy and I asked him if he would be willing to take a small package for Lala to Turin. He agreed without hesitation. I was so happy that I found the way to send the shoes for her and Lia and some fabric to make dresses. Also the books: a dictionary, a grammar, and Giulio's book. I wrote a letter[14] on June 26, 1946 and immediately mailed it with the airmail notifying Lala about this possibility."In the beginning of July will be departing another convoy train of Italians. I am sending you a small package with shoes for Lia and for you by one Italian from Turin. …I am afraid to mail you many and better items, because I don't believe too much you will receive it."

I was unhappy about Lia's health and wrote to Lala: "I think that you are not taking good care of her. Judging from the photo, she is so skinny. …What she has with her stomach? … I assume that you are already cooking for her vegetable soup? …Maybe you remember how I made it for Talyk.[15]"

"On the last photo she looks very gracious, very pretty and her face looks very foxy. I look at her every day and talk to her. I would like very much to have much larger photo, so I could see all the traits of her face more distinctly."

I was also worrying about my daughter's health. Why her hands, are still swollen. "In every letter you are writing about washing clothes. Maybe, it's because you keep them too much in cold water. …Make very serious effort not to do it and soak the hands in warm salty water before going to sleep."

From a few letters that I received so far from Lala I had the impression that not everything was going so smoothly in the family as she wrote it in the beginning. So, I gave her my advice on this matter:

I am worrying a little that you write about the eccentricity of Giulio's parents. What exactly you mean by that? All people have their own special habits, their own opinions; it is very natural and normal. They will be always looking at you as not their own. But everything will depend on you. Until you live with them, you cannot meddle in the other castle with your rules. And I am afraid that with your character it will be very difficult. You should not make any contradictions, any objections. You should obey everything that the elders want, because they are teaching you. It is the common sense how you should learn now.

That's the shape that your life is taking and, I would say, that it is not too bad compared to what it could have been. Of course, I don't know all the details of their originality, but I am asking you to be more compromising and not to show your own originality too.

I complained that it is already more then a month gone by after I mailed two letters to Papa, but there is no answer yet; that I still have not much hope to see him and cannot imagine how it could happen. "It seems that it is as impossible as the encounter with you." Then sometimes I think that my future shall depend on his letter with the information I asked to mail me about him working in Germany. "I would like to be able to join him, because I don't have hope to be with you."

About my health, it is "as usual, my stomach sometimes is hurting and sometimes not."

"My work from one day to another is becoming more and more difficult. There is not much merchandise on the market, everything is very expensive and there are very few customers for the expensive items, but I make all possible to have a profit, as they say until the last moment. And …another work I was offered …was postponed until the last moment when all the other possibilities [about joining Papa] would be exhausted."

At the end of the letter I notified them about Rufin's family mournful news. His mother died from the heart attack; she was gone in fifteen minutes. Rufin grieved very much. The funerals were very solemn. Also about Lidia's mother who is sick with the stomach.

The next day, early in the morning, I hurried to the station in Katowice to give the package to the Italian by the name Giuseppe who was departing with a convoy train repatriating ex-prisoners. He gave me his address and told me that he will notify my daughter when he arrives in Turin.

Just to be sure that at least one of the letters would arrive notifying my daughter about the package, The next day I mailed a postcard[16] and one more letter[17] on June 28, 1946. I wrote that I was sending a small package by Giuseppe Santifero, who is returning home in Turin in Via Roma, 35. That Giuseppe was "my acquaintance at the market and will also tell you about my life and my work"

I apologized for such a modest package, but stated that I was afraid that it will not arrive there. And I suggested that maybe it was possible for Giulio to came here and to take some of the things that I could find here on the market.

Rufin asked me to write the news for Giulio that *Herr* Kamionka,[18] is alive, he encountered him in one camp.

For some reason right from the beginning I had a presentiment that the package I was sending by Giuseppe would never get in the hands of my daughter. But I was willing to take a risk because I knew how my daughter needed shoes.

One thing that I didn't mention yet to my daughter and Giulio, was about a remote hope for my departure to Germany with the German families. I had in me the strongly ingrained popular belief that one should not talk about the good things that one wishes to happen, because it might bring "bad luck." Therefore, I refrained from mentioning it to keep the "bad luck" away from this unbelievable idea, which had one chance in a million to succeed and which only Rufin and Lidia believed achievable.

About one month after I received the last letter from Lala I received a long letter[19] from Giulio written in French:

June 24, 1946

Our dear Maman! This time it's me who is writing you, because Lala has very little time and also she has to write to Papa. It is two days as we received a long letter from Papa and Igor. They are still together and both are in good health. The first thing that he is asking us is about you, because in our first letter we didn't specify your present situation. He is asking where are you and, if it is possible to find you, how to do it. It would have been better to send his letter to you, but he did write a little bit too much.[20] Therefore, we thought that it was better to write you the most important things with hope that during this time you will also receive his letter.

Papa writes that after they had left us in Laband,[21] they saved themselves by escaping to Dresden, where they worked until the front came too close and they had to run south, and then north, and again south, all by foot for 1,600 kilometers and again for 1,000 kilometers. At the end they found the Americans.

Right now they are in a camp for the foreigners, but they are free. As they write, they live well without needing anything; they were also given clothing as the old one was all worn out. Both are working in the camp's office, but in general, all other persons like them are without active work and they believe that it will be difficult to remain in Germany. People talk that before winter they shall depart either to South America or to England.

We have asked him to send you some documents of the American authority that certify his position there. And we believe that with this document it could be possible for you to try the road through the consulate in Katowice. Naturally, it is only our suggestion, we don't know if it could be realized. We believe that maybe it will be better that you accept the position of the governess and wait to see what will be possible to do later.

I cannot tell what surprise and joy Papa had by finding out about our marriage and our departure

to Italy. He will write you about it. Between all this cheerful news only Igor is sad, because he doesn't have hope to embrace his little ones. He is asking, if we have their photo. Maybe you have them? He is asking all the news about them, but it is sad for us to write, because we know that he will be unhappy to hear them.

Lia has grown well, she is not fat, but she is very strong in her constitution, she is already standing up near her small chair and she holds herself only with one hand. She has an intelligent gaze in her eyes; every little thing is interesting to her. When we are going for a walk she is turning her head in all directions. In the streetcar she wants to remain in front, so she can see everything.

Now we are already giving her a light vegetable soup, cream of wheat with milk, and another soup made with the flour and milk. Naturally, we also give her all kinds of fruits, oranges, peaches, apricots, and also carrots and tomatoes. Is it all right like that for the vitamins? We are trying to give her the best and in this thing we don't make economy. But unfortunately now the little one has a whooping cough. We have brought her to the doctor, who prescribed her some medicine to calm her cough. But she supports her illness very well. She eats well every day and she didn't lose any weight. She is sending a big kiss to her grandmother.

Maman, you are asking me how it goes for me with Lala, if my idol didn't fall from the pedestal yet. No! She is always on top, but… Sometimes there is some small dispute with my mother, both have very hard heads and then Giulio had to make feel them better, a little bit one and then another, until all is past. But these are small passing clouds and the sun is returning quickly with the peace.

We have thought that later Lala should go to school for seamstresses, so it will be useful for her, for the little one, and maybe also with my mother to make some work.

Lala likes Italy. Here in Turin there are the hills with the woods and sometimes we go there to collect flowers and Lala is very happy of this promenade. Naturally, we don't have much money to spend for the amusements, but we go sometimes to the movies, or to downtown to buy ice cream; but the important thing for us is to remain together and close with our little one.

To answer your question to Lala about what she needs. She is saying that here in Turin one finds everything one wants. Naturally, one needs lots of money. Therefore, it will be better that you buy only one thing but very good one, and after when it will be possible you could send it to her.

Our dear Maman, we also remember the time when we were together and when during difficult times we were happy. And we know how much it was your merit; we always hope to embrace you and now, also Papa.

You need to say to Rufin to have patience, because we don't have yet an apartment. That's why it is impossible at this moment to invite him and Madam Lidia to come to Italy. But we have not forgotten them and we would have also a great pleasure to see them again. Give them our regards.

To you we all send our kisses and the regards of my parents. Lia, Lala, and Giulio.

P.S. Today it is very hot here, 48° C in the sun and 28° C in the apartment. Lala had liquefied!

Giulio's letter brought much news about my husband and his brother, about Lia, Lala, and Giulio. It gave me a piece of mind about them, but I was concerned about the problems between Lala and her mother-in-law. I decided that in my next letter I would scold my daughter for her character and would suggest her to be more tolerant while living in the home of Giulio's parents.

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1. Olga Gladky Verro, letter to her mother [in German] Turin Italy, April 29, 1946, private collection of Olga Gladky Verro.
2. From the exema. See the chapter "Birthof Our Daughter Lia."
3. Russianized form of a diminutive name for Giulio.
4. The respectable form of "You" spelled with the capital letter, as used in many languages.
5. The all wool fabric in twill weave used for suits.
6. Bruno Zanobini, Giulio's friend. See the chapter "Italian Armistice."
7. Orest M. Gladky, letter to Giulio's parents [in French] Mannheim, Germany, April 11, 1946,

private collection of Olga Gladky Verro.

8. Not occupied by the Soviet Army.

9. Part of Europe occupied by the Soviet Army.

9. Antonina G. Berezhnaya Gladky, letter to her daughter [in French] Michalkowice, Poland. May 29, 1946, private collection of Olga Gladky Verro.

10. Olga Gladky Verro, letter to her mother [in German] Turin, Italy. May 28, 1946, private collection of Olga Gladky Verro.

11. 'R' stands for Russian because we were afraid to write the full name in case the letter gets in the Soviet's hands.

12. The commonly used name for arthritis in Italy.

13. Our code name for the Soviets.

14. Antonina G. Berezhnaya Gladky. letter to her daughter [in Russian] Michalkowice, Poland. June 26, 1946, private collection of Olga Gladky Verro.

15. The little son of Anna Gavriylovna Berezhnaya, a sister of Antonina G. Berezhnaya Gladky. See the chapters "My Childhood In the Hamlet of Snyezhnoye" and "Scarlet Fever and Diphtheria Outbreak."

16. Antonina G. Berezhnaya Gladky, postcard to her daughter [in French] Michalkowice, Poland. June 27, 1946, private collection of Olga Gladky Verro.

17. Antonina G. Berezhnaya Gladky, letter to her daughter and son-in-law [in French] Michalkowice, Poland. June 28, 1946, private collection of Olga Gladky Verro.

18. Head of the telephone department and Nazi Party boss at the Presswerke. See the chapter "Presswerke Laband."

19. Giulio Verro, letter to his mother-in-law [in French].Turin, Italy. June 24, 1946, private collection of Olga Gladky Verro.

20. He wrote things that would be dangerous for his wife if the Soviets could intercept the letter.

21. See chapter "Chance, Destiny or the Will Of God."

Chapter 52

Praying To God and Holy Mary

Olga Gladky Verro
As Remembered by Antonina G. Berezhnaya Gladky

My future continued to be unknown. There were no letters from my husband, although I wrote to him as soon as I got his address. I was doing my business as usual at the market in Katowice, but it was becoming less and less profitable. However, before, when the business was good, I saved enough money to keep feeding the whole family for some time, unless the inflation would erode the value of zloty.

Because I was worrying so much about my future, one day Lidia said in her sweet voice, "We shall go next week to Piekari[1] to pray the Virgin Mary to help you join your husband."

Rufin replied, "*Pani*, if Lidka says we shall go to Piekari, then we shall go there. There is one church that believers visit frequently to pray."

We had a nice trip to the old town where there were several Catholic churches. Rufin and Lidia told me that one of them was also known in Poland for the Venerate Image of the Virgin Mary. We attended a Mass and prayed for a successful reunion with my husband. On our way home Lidia told me, "*Pani*, now you should have only patience to wait. Holy Mary shall show you the road to follow for joining your husband."

"I hope so, because there's no other solution," I replied.

From Piekary I mailed a postcard[2] to Lala and Giulio with a short message:

August 10, 1946, [Piekari, Poland]

We are sending you greetings from Piekari where we came to pray God and Saint Mary to help us. Rufin is making for me everything, like he made it for you. But for now I need to wait. Maybe I will meet Papa again. We embrace you dearly. Mama.

After our return from the trip, I wrote immediately a letter[3] to my daughter voicing strongly my opinion on the unpleasant situation that developed between her and Giulio's mother:

August 12, 1946, [Michalkowice, Poland]

Good day, my dear children! Finally after waiting for a long time I received Giulio's letter of June 24, which was stamped July 3, 1946.

Praise the Lord that everything in general goes well. But some things I don't like. In particular, first, the health of Lia with whooping cough. Where did she catch it? It is a contagious disease. The best remedy is the change of climate for a few days. In her infancy Lala had this illness, I made this change on time. It made a great effect. Try to make this for Lia.

Second, are the arguments between Lala and Mother-in-law. Now I am ashamed for the upbringings of my daughter. The life is already hard and this makes it even harder. I can't understand the reason for such disputes.

Lala! Some time ago I already wrote that you should be correct, you shouldn't forget that you are in another country, that you are in a society that is completely different in its traditions and customs than in the country you had lived. That's why you should be content and not try to change it. You shouldn't tell me that these are little things. I know well your character, and Giulio knows the traditions of his parents. In the beginning the disputes could be inevitable, but you should put an end to them. I don't want to believe that the mother of your husband who loves him wants to hurt you, or wants to make bad suggestions to you.

If, for instance, you don't agree with the opinion of your mother in law, you should diplomatically make a compromise as they are doing the grand diplomats. I understand the family is big, the apartment is small, everyone has his nerves, it is very natural, but the peace is better. They say in Russian: 'If it is impossible, than it is only difficult.' Yes, you have seen how I am able to live with people.

You should have learned from me. And you should know that it had been always for my

advantage.

Now about my future. I don't have any letters from Papa, while I sent him many. Therefore, it is necessary that you write him everything about my life and that he gives you the answer if it is possible for me to join him and what should be done to do it. Also ask him, if for example, I can do something about it, would it be possible for him to accept me. I think the best thing is what you suggested—it gives me more security and hope. Then ask him if he can write a letter for me and send through you a certificate that I asked him to mail me. It will be safer—your letters I receive and from him not.

My life is like always. But lately we had many events. First, there were the funerals of Rufin's mother. This followed by Anniversary of marriage by Pietrowski parents. Then, there was a marriage of Rufin's brother. And now in the project is the marriage of another brother. At this moment Rufin is vacationing in a forest as the instructor in the student's camp. For a month-and-half I was alone in the home, because Lidia was with her sister. The next month she departs with her mother to her grandparents in the country, becau¬se her mother is sick. I live very well with all Rufin's and Lidia's relatives; everybody respects me; my joys are their joys and their sorrows are my sorrows, and vice versa.

Yes, you are right about Igor. Write him that Antonina wanted to go to her aunt that lived in Latvia. He could try finding out if they are there. If he has her aunt's address, he should mail it to me. I will attempt to send her a letter; also I could attempt to send a letter to our hometown to have some news about them. It seems to me that one should not loose hope about them. In one year or so, one could make some inquiries with the international Red Cross.

Have you received my package from Giuseppe Sentifero, who lives on Via Roma, 35 in Turin? He should have already arrived in Turin, because he departed from Katowice on July 10. Forgive me that I have sent also some nonessential things, but the main things were the shoes that I had already on hand at the moment of departure. Then I was not sure that you would receive them. I also mailed the books, three of them. I am interested very much if, for example, your father could send you something, would you be able to sell them and buy something else that you need.

I like very much the last photo of Lia. Really, she resembles her grandfather Gladky. When she will be one year old you should make a nice photo in a photo-atelier. She has a very pleasing and intelligent face. But her health worries me.

I am always waiting with impatience your letters. Write as soon as possible the letter to Papa, because I am waiting for his news. Greetings from Rufin and Lidia and, also from the Pietrowski family. Thousands kisses to Lia. Be in good health. I embrace all of you dearly. Your mother.

P.S. I want to say few words to Giulio for his mother. Ask her to forgive me for the upbringings of my daughter and ask her not to be too severe with Lala. Forward all my respect and my cordial greetings to your parents.

On the third week of August I received Lala's letter[4] written at the end of July. It was written in German:

July 30, 1946

My dear Mama, how long I didn't write to you! I had so much to do! I wanted to show to my mother-in-law that I could sew and embroider. I had made from the white pique a beautiful little dress, the shoes, and a hat for Lia. Naturally, daily I put only one-and-half-hour to work on it, and it took a long time to make it. Then there were the letters to write to Papa and to Uncle Igor.

I received your letter from June 28, 1946. There is no such man by the name of Giuseppe living in Via Roma, 35. It is too bad, because you made this little package with such care. But in the future don't send anything more to me. It is better that you make something for yourself. Sell all your other things and buy for yourself only the best items that shall be more useful.

Papa writes to me a lot. He had received already two of your letters and had sent answers to you. Wait for them. I am not happy that he and his brother are not staying any more together. I think he will write you all about it. He waits to receive some kind of a certificate that will allow him to come here to see us. But Igor told him, 'There is nothing for me to do there.' Maybe he comes alone. I think he is waiting to see you soon. Search every opportunity to join him.

Here is as usual, lots of work. But on Sundays we are going for walks in the hills, or in the

gardens, or in the city parks. For Lia these are the best hours when she is outside. She recognizes already very well the little dogs, cats, and horses. She moves her little legs and hands so fast, as if she wants to run after them and it is very difficult to hold her.

Every day brings many new things for her. She remains always very small and quick, but she is not skinny. She has beautiful strong legs and stands already alone. She walks very well on the balcony holding at the bars and making five to six steps. She derives a lot of pleasure to walk holding only my hand. We are hoping that in one month she will be walking very well.

Her whooping cough is going away slowly, now it is in a light phase. I caught from her also the whooping cough and it is already better. Yes, in her eight month my Lia is already weighing seven kilograms and had her first tooth, the lower one. Now it is coming out the second one. We are, very satisfied with her health. She will soon grow up into a pretty little girl.

She is smart and artful in getting what she wants. She says already perfectly 'mama' and is trying to say many combinations of letters, such as 'ta-ta-ta','gr-gr', 'ga-ga'. Now she is getting ready to use her throat sounds. Every evening after supper Giulio goes with Lia, and sometimes with me, to take a walk at the meadow in the vicinity. I embroider something and Lia plays on the grass with children, or with her Papa.

My hands are little bit better. They are giving me the shots of *iodosulfina*. It is already the twentieth shot, but the healing is very slow. It is already more then two months that I am not washing clothes. Hopefully, it will not go on for too long. Giulio cannot wait when it will be over.

About the apartment for us for this winter, it is very doubtful that we will find one. They are asking from sixty to one hundred thousand liras only to search for the apartment and after to pay about one thousand liras per month for rent. Oh! How I would like to have my own quiet little corner but...we cannot afford it.

How are Rufin and *Pani* Lidia? Where Rufin is working? Always as far, or now he works in the local movie theater, as he wanted? And *Pani* Lidia, is she always looking as budding and lovely as before?

How are you doing Mama? How is your work? I know that it is not light and it is not going to improve. Giulio and I are talking often about your lives. I hope that you can meet with Papa soon. I was glad, that now you too believe that Lord God[5] would not forget you. Mama, keep your head up, Lord God had always helped us.

Giulio is hoping that after two or three years Rufin and his wife could make a trip to see us. It would be so nice.

I found one neighbor who is from the town of *Frau* Maria[6] but she is not very interesting and we see each other very rarely.

All in the family are sending their cordial greetings to all of you. Lia and Giulio are kissing you all. And naturally I am kissing you too. Greetings to Pietrowski family. As always, your children, Lala, Giulio, Lia.

P.S. Good night my dear Mama. Forgive me for such long silence but family life is not like living "at the mother's bosom."[7] Lala.

From this last letter of my daughter I found a lot about the progress of my granddaughter in growing up and I was thriving on this news. But I was really upset about the package I gave to that Italian for my daughter. He seemed to be such a nice young man. It was a lesson for me not to judge a person only by their manners and by their talkativeness. But I was still hoping that maybe his family moved and that he will notify my daughter later. I wrote immediately a letter[8] to my daughter to let her know about my concerns:

August 24, 1946, [Michalkowice, Poland]

My dear little daughter! I had received very quickly your last letter, of July 30, mailed with Air Mail. It was mailed August 8 and I received it on August 23, but it is too expensive for you, that's why I agree to have more patience and not deprive you of something.

Your last letter made a big impression on me. Really, I feel that there are some things you don't write to me completely. Your health is worrying me very much. The whooping cough is more dangerous for you then for Lia. And your hands! My God! I had thought that the Italian climate would be more favorable for your health. Or maybe that's the general influence of the change in the climate. Write to me why your hands are ailing. I ask you to write all the details about your

health. I thank both of you for writing many details about Lia. I congratulate her with her first tooth and her first steps. You, Lala, also have begun to walk at eight months.

How sorry I am that you didn't receive my package, which contained the shoes for Lia. I am sorry also for the books, which I found with grand difficulty. Try to find him. His woman told me that he departed from Prague on July 29. Maybe he didn't arrive yet. She gave me his other address: Giuseppe Pisani, Via Mussolini, No.2. I will try to keep in touch with his woman because he will write to her.

After your letter, I received a letter from Papa. After reading his letter, I understood also that everything is all right with him and that he hopes to see me again soon. But how it will happen? It will depend only on me, this I understood also from your letter.
But about his brother there is not even one word, not even a greeting. This surprised me very much because I had sent him a long letter, in which I described the life of his family. Papa's letter in general was very short and written in French. I would try to do something using his letter.

My life is as usual - I am working. But lately the business is bad. All those, who were giving good returns, had departed home. Also, it became difficult to buy good things. I am doing now as you suggested, I sell three of my old things and buy one new, to make my suitcases lighter.

Rufin and Lidia are in good health. Both of them became fat exclusively thanks to my patronage. Giulio, be very happy and tranquil—I have rendered well my gratitude. Sorry, that I cannot make you fat!

I would like to send you one more package with another comrade Italian, maybe he is more honest. I am surer of him, because he has a woman who confides with me.
The letters from Papa take very long to arrive, one-and-half months. To know the answer to something one has to wait three months!

Lala, does Lia crawl on the floor? Isn't your cold floor harmful for her health? Take care of her, evaluate every step, she had already endured enough illnesses. Take care of your health too! From it depends everything else, happiness and riches! Everything could be acquired, but health cannot be bought. Remember, in the beginning your father and I didn't have anything. And when you were born, we had for you only three sheets for your little bed, three little shirts, and a few diapers.

Forward my sincere greetings to Giulio's parents and Domenico. I embrace you dearly. Your mother.

P.S. You wrote that Papa does not live with his brother, but Papa doesn't write me anything about it. This I cannot understand.
P.S. Lately it rains every day. It seems that it is already autumn. And I am afraid that I am loosing time to be able to depart when it is still warm.

In the second half of August I received another letter[9] from Lala. It was written again in German:

August 18, 1946

Dearest mine and ours Mama! Dear Rufin and *Pani* Lidia!

It is so long that I wrote you. Right now, my mother-in-law is in the village at her sister's for relaxation and to find some olive oil produced there. I had been alone keeping the house. But Giulio is helping me very much.

Lia has already two lower teeth and now she is suffering from the third upper one. Also, she has a little cold from our concrete and tile floor. The little one is always energetic, vigorous, and not fat.

Mama, Lia had already worn out to the end the white shoes that I made for her. Can you imagine how she runs? Now we are beginning preparations for the winter. We have to sew and to mend everything for Lia and for us, stockings, pullovers, underwear, and other items. And Lia, this little mischief-maker is everywhere and requires all the time for herself.

On Sundays Giulio wants to relax. We go for a walk in the hills, always with something to eat for us and for Lia and remain there for half-a-day. And there is nothing to do to change his mind; he does not want to hear anything. There is no work that is important when is the time to

relax outside in the fresh air and sun and to walk.

The little one is beginning already to say some words. She knows very well her Papa and loves him more then anybody else, because every evening he is bringing her for a walk. Outside, Lia rejoice to see the little dogs and kittens, and the little children.

Mama, it is too bad about your package. But also Santifero does not sound as an Italian name. The name and then the ad¬dress at Via Roma, 35 is where are only the commercial buildings. We have searched very well, but there is no such person. For the future, don't send anything.

Dear Mama, I am receiving the letters from Papa very often. He will write also to you. Just wait. He will describe to you all. You must make everything possible from your side to join him. Because I understood that he cannot send anything for you.

Giulio and I also think that you should find some kind of work and wait a little when the peace will be signed. Because until now the things about the travel are not so easy; and we think that in the near future Papa can find an apartment and then he will call for you.

We also are searching all the time for a place for us to live, hopefully, for the next spring, if everything will be all right. But the prices are going up, they are already asking sixty thousand liras only for entering the apartment. We must wait.

And you *Mamusya*[10] try don't think much about me. You take good care of your health. I am happy and Giulio is always the same person like you knew him.

How is your life and work? And Rufin is always so jolly and shrewd? We remember very often him and all of you and pray Lord God to help you. Soon I will write to you a longer letter.

My hands are better with the injections of *iodosolfina*.

All are sending you their sincere greetings. We all kiss you dearly. Greetings to Pietrowski family. Yours Lala, Giulio, Lia.

P.S. "Lots of greetings and kisses to you *Maman* and for *Pani* Lidia and *Pan* Rufin. We have received a letter from that Italian Giuseppe. There is no package. He is telling us that they took the package from him at the border. *Pax*![11] Giulio."

I was unhappy with too many things I read in the last letters from Lala and Giulio and right away sat to write them[12] a letter:

August 28, 1946, [Michalkowice, Poland]

My dear ones, I received very quickly your last letter, in eight days; it was mailed from Turin on the 20th and received on 28th.

Everything is fine, my dearest, but the health of Lia is making me very sad. Really, in every letter you write that Lia is sick! I have already written that I am afraid your tile floor is bad for her. You should not allow her to walk barefoot on the cold floor; it is also too dangerous to sit or to crawl on it. I am warning you because I remember one of our acquaintances told me how her daughter was sick from the cold floor. I am asking also you, Giulio, to consider and pay attention to this. It is an enigma that after Lia was born she is always sick!

You write that she is energetic and that you take good care of her. If she will be energetic as her grandmother, that's me, I wish her well. It is natural that she is vigorous, those are the traits of her parents. I imagine well as she walks. Lala, you were walking well also at this age of eight months. That's because of being so energetic that you have a star on your forehead. Therefore, you should pay good attention, because with the children one should use precaution and prevention.

You don't write anything about the language. In what language does Lia learns to speak and you speak with her? One day the little boy, Lidia's nephew, looking at Lia's photo reflected for a while and said, 'What a lucky child, she will speak in all languages. Because her mother speaks three languages, her grandmother speaks many languages, and her father speaks also Italian.' He made us laugh a lot.

From Papa I received only one letter. From your letter I understood that, if I myself cannot make something, then I must wait. You write that he must receive a good job and then to call me. I couldn't understand, who, Giulio or papa?

I want to try to do something with Papa's letter; I am waiting for Rufin who should return

on Friday, August 30, because he is going back to work on September 2 after vacations. I hope that the autumn will not arrive too quickly and does not make me to depart in haste. But it is all very problematic yet. It is yet only a hope.

My work from one day to another becomes more difficult to do business - it is enough only for me alone. But will it be enough to nourish the three persons for the whole winter? If not, it is too bad—I would not be able to do it. And without the money one cannot be cherished no matter how closely related one is. That's why the winter for me also will be a problem to live here.

I am embracing you very dearly. Keep yourself in good health, especially Lia. Lala, remember what I wrote about Lia, cherish her. My greetings to Verro family. Send my love to Papa. Your mother.

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1. Piekari, Slaskie, a town in southwestern Poland known for the church with the Venerated Piekary Saint Mary.

2. Antonina G. Berezhnaya Gladky, postcard to her daughter and son-in-law [in French] Piekary, Slaskie, Poland, August 10, 1946, private collection of Olga Gladky Verro.

3. Antonina G. Berezhnaya Gladky, letter to her daughter and her son-in-law [in French] Michalkowice, Poland, August 12, 1946.

4. Olga Gladky Verro, letter to her mother [in German] Turin Italy, July 30, 1946, private collection of Olga Gladky Verro..

5. Russian Orthodox way of referring to God.

6. *Frau* Maria Alexandrova, my friend from Laband, was from the city of Kharkov. See the chapter "Presswerke Laband."

7. Ukrainian proverb.

8. Antonina G. Berezhnaya Gladky, letter to her daughter [in French] Michalkowice, Poland, August 24, 1946, private collection of Olga Gladky Verro.

9. Olga Gladky Verro, letter to her mother [in German] Turin, Italy, August 18, 1946, private collection of Olga Gladky Verro.

10. Diminutive for Mama [in Russian].

11. Piece! [in Latin].

12. Antonina G. Berezhnaya Gladky, letter to her daughter and son-in-law [in French] Michalkowice, Poland, August 28, 1946, private collection of Olga Gladky Verro.

Chapter 53

My Future Hangs On Thread Of Hope

Olga Gladky Verro
As Recounted by Antonina G. Berezhnaya Gladky

I was waiting impatiently to hear from my husband.[1] Finally, the letter from him arrived. I opened it with the hope to find the documents that I requested about his place of residence and work in Germany. To my great disappointment it was only a short letter[2] in French written for him by somebody else:

July 29, 1946

Dear Antonina! There is change in my life. Our firm, company, will be working elsewhere, where, I don't know yet definitely. But I have permission for living accommodations here, because I don't know how long my work will last. But my address will not change. My sister is in the hospital. But the owner of the apartment said that she might arrive here, because I wrote to him about it before I knew that I must depart. It is a pity that you are not here, because I have to leave all my things in this empty apartment. Since I know for a long time the owner, I trust him as myself.

I have received one letter from Lala that introduced me to everything. Without doubt you are interested about my life. It is not all as bad as I presented. We work with my brother and we don't need anything.

One thing is worrying me very much is the health of my sister whom I am expecting with impatience. And why my home shall be without her? The doctor said that to cure her completely an operation is necessary; there shall be no risk if she could make this during the 8-10 months. I would like to know your opinion about this. I think it is necessary that she make this decision so she wouldn't be always sick and remain in a hospital.

How are you, my dear? I know, it is hard also for you to be alone. What can be done? How to help you?

Greetings from me to everybody. I am waiting for your letter with immense impatience. I embrace you tenderly. Your Orest.

It took me a while to understand the message in my husband's enigmatic letter. First I had to decipher the handwriting and then the meaning, because it was written as an allegory, which I suggested in my letter to him. Probably Lala had cautioned him not to write any thing that might compromise me with the Soviets in case the letter would fall into their hands. My husband went beyond what I suggested allegorizing and hiding the true names and meaning.

However, I understood that he couldn't yet have a document from his place of work, because he is searching how to get it. One thing was clear that he has a place to live probably in a camp. And "the owner of the apartment" whom he trusts is probably the Americans. He writes that he is expecting me and that his address remains the same. This part of the allegory was easy to understand.

Then all that he is writing about "his sister", he is talking about me. That he is worrying about me and expects with impatience the news about my situation. He writes, as I suggested that this sister is sick, that she is in a hospital and needs an ope¬ration. I understood that he had deciphered it from my letter that I could be in a serious trouble being in the Soviet occupied country and that I need to make my decision soon for a departure from here, because I do not want to remain here for the rest of my life.

"The doctor", as I wrote to him, meant somebody who is helping me in my "operation" or a departure. And that it should be safe if it is done within the next 8-10 months.

Well, considering what we have deciphered from each other's letters, there was actually nothing concrete at this time. The important thing was that he understood what kind of docu¬ments he had to send me. This gave me a hope that he would try to obtain them. But, I need to wait maybe for very long time. However, my hope to get reunited with my husband went up, since all German families were also waiting for a departure.

I had no secrets from Lidia and Rufin and always read to them all the letters from Lala and Giulio. This time I also shared with them the contents and the interpretation of my husband's letter.

Rufin promptly commented to me, "I told you, that now you have only to find the right person to make documents to your specification! From his letter it is clear that he is trying to find somebody to do it. Don't worry; you will join your husband very soon!" But I felt that my future was hanging on the thin hair of a hope that depended on the expectations, which were contrary to all reasonable estimates of probability.

However, Rufin's prediction had to be admired, because soon after my husband's letter I received an answer to my second letter to Monsieur Etienne Demey. In my letter, prompted by Rufin, I asked my French friend to send me some kind of identification document stating that I was French and explained to him that it just might help me to join my husband in Germany.

I never expected that he would send me such paper. With great suspense I opened the envelope and, to my great surprise there was a short letter, and an affidavit with all the necessary notarization, stating that I was French. I translated it and handed document to Rufin, who probably was also surprised, but he remained composed and said, "*Pani*, remember what I told you, today you just need to find the right person."

Lidia asked, "Is this document a valid identification?"

"If the person who checks it accepts it, then it is valid," Rufin replied. He already found out that the registration of the German wives and families for a departure to Germany was done by the office of the Red Cross in Katowice. But the local Catholic priests were in charge of screening the applicants and the Red Cross was responsible for registering and the convoy train. He also found out that a voluntary donation to cover the costs of this operation was appreciated.

"*Pani*," he said to me, "tomorrow we will go to the parish where the Red Cross employee is coming. We will try to register you as a French woman joining her husband in Germany."

"I don't have yet the documents from my husband," I said. "Take with you your husband's letters," he replied. "And don't worry. Leave all the talking to me."

We had a meeting with the priest and Rufin told him confidentially the truth, who I was and that my husband was indeed in Germany. I showed him my husband's letters and the document that I just received from my French friend.

"What is written here?" asked the priest. "It's an affidavit that *Pani* is French," answered Rufin. Then he added, "And *Pani* is waiting from her husband a paper with his address and the place of work in Germany."

"Can you help me, Father, to join my husband?" I asked humbly.

The priest answered in an indirect way, "In the next room there is a woman from the Red Cross; she is registering for the convoy train to Germany. You don't have to tell her anything what Rufin told me about you. Just show her this document from France and tell her that this is your identification paper and show her the envelope with your husband's letters and tell her that you are waiting from him the official papers with his address and workplace in Germany."

"Thank you, thank you, Father," I said.

"Thank you very much, Father," Rufin seconded.

The priest led me to another room. Standing at the door, he said to the woman sitting at the desk, "Here is another woman to register."

The woman who had the Red Cross emblem on her arm saluted me in German, "*Guten Tag*!"[3]

"*Guten Tag*!" I answered. She continued to talk to me in German and I did the same.

"Is your husband in Germany now?"

"*Ya*," I replied.

"Show me his papers."

"I am waiting for them to arrive soon. Here is his address." And I gave her the envelope with his letters.

"Show me your identification papers?"

I gave her my French affidavit. The woman looked at it carefully and asked, "Are you French?"

"*Ya*."

The woman filled the Red Cross pass with my name and birth date. Giving it to me she said, "This pass is valid only for the convoy train for the wives and families of the German men who are now in Germany. You will be responsible to buy your ticket and when you will board the train, you should have your husband's papers with his address and place of work."

"I know," I replied and asked her, "When the train is scheduled to depart?"

"We don't know yet. Keep in touch with this office. Good luck!" She made me understand that she had finished with me.

I said, "*Danke schön. Auf Wiedersehen*!"[4]

"*Auf Wiedersehen*!" she dismissed me.

I walked out of the room surprised with the ease this Red Cross pass was given to me. I expected a severe scrutiny of my papers and questioning about my husband's whereabouts.

Rufin was waiting for me. I showed him the Red Cross pass and told him what happened.

"Well, it was very easy," he said, "Thanks to the good will of the charitable Father. You should leave them a good donation." And I did it with great generosity.

"Now you have only to wait for the papers from your husband and to board the convoy train to Germany."

"I don't know, I don't feel yet that it is real."

"You will! Read what is written on the pass: 'Valid for the convoy train to Germany for the German wives and families.'"

When we came home, Lidia asked me, "Do you have good news? How was your interview?"

I replied, "It is all done. I have the pass for the convoy train to Germany."

Rufin said, "*Pani* gave a generous donation to the church for this. It was the Father who made it happen."

Lidia wanted to know all the details. Rufin and I recounted everything. When we fini¬shed our story Lidia concluded, "I told you, the Virgin Mary would show you the road to follow in joining your husband."

"Now, let's hope that my husband's papers will arrive in time before the departure of the convoy train," I concluded.

"*Pani,"* said Rufin convincingly, "stop worrying! With this pass from the Red Cross you will be able to board the train. If they will check your other documents, you show them first your papers stating that you are French. Then, if your husband's papers didn't arrive, start to look for them in your bag, like you misplaced them. Then show your husband's letter and the envelope with his address, as you did during the registration."

Rufin's reasoning was quite convincing. Therefore, I immediately wrote a letter[5] to my husband explaining that there are some probabilities that eventually could become possibilities to join him:

September 18, 1946, [Michalkowice, Poland]

Dear Orest! Today I have received your third letter while this is my seventh letter. Your last letter made a big impression on me. Really, so pessimistic... Your destiny as is also mine is a vagabond life and I have been already used to it. We cannot complain about this definition, because we are without a roof.

I am making at this moment all possible to be with you and to share all that destiny shall send to us, even more now when your relationship with Igor is so painful for me. What happened? Why? It seems to me that in your situation, how you were, it should have made you to be closer, but in reality it happen just the opposite. How strange it is, how strange. I would like to know all the truth, but you are not writing anything. It seems to me that your difficult characters are not the reason for it. I am waiting for your answer to this question.

Next, I am worrying about your health, but you don't say anything about it. It remains logical for me only to think, *He is alive and he is probably in good health.*

As about me, lately I feel a little bit weak. My work and in general my age makes me feel this way. Don't you for¬get, your wife had also aged, but they say that I am still very energetic! Really, every day I am traveling and all day stand on my feet at the market. It makes me tremble only to think that this winter I would have to remain again standing all day outside. That's why I am making the efforts to change my work and the climate.

I already wrote you about the operation of the sister. It is inevitable, and one needs to make all necessary preparations for it. With the first possibility it shall be accomplished and I assume that for this winter, or maybe sooner, for this autumn, the sister will be at home, as the professor had promised me.

Monsieur Demey mailed me one letter and also a document that I asked him about. He writes that he mailed the letters to you and Lala. His address that you have is of his parents. I am giving you another one, his own: 'Monsieur Etienne Demey, Petit Rue P. Engel, Bavillieis territ. De Belfort, France.' Just in case that we might need it again.

I am waiting also a letter from Lala, because your letters are coming always at the same time. As about Lala, I represent well her life. Thank God that she is in good health. The conditions of her life are not very desirable, but what one can do? Let's hope that this improves with time. Everything cannot be done at once. Do you remember well our life? We also didn't have anything. And after, by working, acquired little by little everything we needed. I wrote her that now she should take care of her health, eat well, and other things shall come with time.

Do you have a photo of the little one? How she resembles you, but Lala writes that she is energetic and underscores that her character resembles mine.

I mailed her one package through an Italian, but regrettably he was not honest and they didn't receive it.

Well, in conclusion, to answer your question, wait little bit and your sister shall make an operation, and after some time she will come out of a hospital.

I am waiting for your answer. I receive your letters in about three to four weeks.

Give my greetings to your friends and, to be polite, say hello from me to Igor. But, it seems to me that the contrariness of your characters should not prevent him from sending me his greetings. I embrace you dearly. Your Antonina.

I was hoping that he would decipher my allegoric description of the situation. Although I had already hinted in the last letter to Lala and Giulio about my hope to join Papa, I decided to write another letter[6] to explain them about my preparations for a departure:

September 19, 1946, [Michalkowice, Poland]

My dear children, it is long time that you don't write to me and I also don't talk to you. The reason is that I made all preparations for my departure. It seems to me that the time had come for this. Rufin promised to help me, as he did for you, and I hope that this fall I would join Papa.

Papa's last letter, where he wrote about his relationship with Igor, had reconfirmed that I am needed for him and also for me. The life will be more supportable to be with someone who is my dear one. Therefore, don't be surprised if you would receive my letter with another address. I don't know the consequences of this operation, but, whatever shall be the results, I had decided to accept anything.

How is the health of the little one? How are her teeth? Write to me as quickly as possible about your life.

I have been used so much to live with the family here that separation with them is frightful and painful. We made the photograph with Rufin and Lidia, a good photo.[7] I have one for you. If it will be possible, I will mail it to you.

Keep yourself in good health. My greetings to the whole family. I embrace you dearly, all three of you. Your mother.

After sending the letter to my husband, I was impatiently waiting for his letter, in which I hoped to find the documents that I asked. Meanwhile Rufin kept himself informed at the Red Cross office about the departure of the convoy train to Germany. I prepared my suitcase with the best and most needed items of my clothing and sorted out what I was leaving behind with Lidia. She agreed to keep it safe until will be possible to send it to me, wherever it will be in the future.

During the last ten days after I wrote the letter to my daughter I didn't received any letters from anybody. Not knowing yet when the convoy train to Germany will be, I decided to write another letter[8] to Lala and Giulio:

September 29, 1946, [Michalkowice, Poland]

My dear children! In one month it will be one year that I am at Rufin's and Lidia's home and, therefore, one year that you and I were separated. The time flies very fast, but the events pass very slowly.

I have very big hope to rejoin Papa by departing soon. But it looks that this would happen by the circumstances independent of me. It resembles, or maybe it will be with me, as it was with you—a sudden departure; and in a short time I will be with him.

My business becomes from one day to another more difficult. I am earning something, but I have enough money to live for one year.

About the situation of Papa I learn more from the newspapers then from his letters. Until now I have received only three letters from him, while I mailed to him seven. His letters and yours I receive in about three weeks.

I would like to travel with him wherever he shall go, so I would share with him all that destiny shall send us. But, if this will be impossible, then what I can do? I am making all possible to join him, otherwise I would have to re¬main with Rufin and Lidia. I hope that they would not chase me out of their house. The economic situation here is also not too good and the life as everywhere else is very hard after the war.

I would like to believe that everything is fine with you; that Lia is in good health, that she is not coughing any more, and that she does not have a cold; that with you, Lala, the hands are better; that you, Giulio, are always in good mood; and that all of you are in good health as we are all here.

I am used so much to be in Rufin's family that I cannot represent the moment when I would have to part with them. But, looking from another side, I dread to remain to live with them without money when I would be a burden to them. Because there is a saying, "Money does everything." That's why I feel the need to join Papa. I also feel that he needs me, that he feels the solitude the same as I feel it.

It is already autumn here. If I start to think that I would have to remain outside this winter, it makes me tremble. That's why I am doing everything to depart. How I am sorry that I lost the moment when I didn't go with him before.

I wrote to Papa not to hurry to depart without me, to wait for me, and, if the situation does not depend from him, not to go too far. Write him my opinion about this; maybe he didn't receive my letters yet.

I already wrote to you that I had received a letter from Monsieur Demey with a certificate for me. He writes that he received the letters from you and from Papa, but all these letters remained for a long time at his parents home, because they believed that they were from a girlfriend and didn't wanted to compromise him with his wife. That's why his answer was so late. I am giving you his new address. We shouldn't lose our liaison with him. His address is: "Petit Rue P. Engel, Bavillieu territ, De Belfort, France."

Have you received the photo of us three? It was taken as a souvenir at the moment when I decided to depart.

I embrace you all very dearly. My greetings to the parents. Rufin, Lidia and Pietrowski family send their cordial greetings. Your mother.

P.S. Send always my greetings to Papa.

P.S. I give you new address of Giuseppe[9] Pisani: "Via Cottolengo 25, Biella, Vercelli." Write him and demand an explanation. Maybe he still has the books.

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1. As recounted by Antonina G. Berezhnaya Gladky and from her letters, trans. Olga Gladky Verro

2. Orest M. Gladky, letter to his wife (in French) Mannhaim, Germany, July 29, 1946, private collection of Olga Gladky Verro.

3. "Good day!" [in German].

4. "Thank you very much. Good bye!" [in German].

5. Antonina G. Berezhnaya Gladky, letter to her husband [in French] Michalkowice, Poland, September 18, 1946, private collection of Olga Gladky Verro.

6. Antonina G. Berezhnaya Gladky, letter to her daughter and son-in-law [in French] Michalkowice,

Poland, September 19, 1946, private collection of Olga Gladky Verro.

7. From the preserved photograph.

8. Antonina G. Berezhnaya Gladky, letter to her daughter and son-in-law [in French] Michalkowice, Poland, September 29, 1946, private collection of Olga Gladky Verro.

9. The Italian, who had a package for Lala and Giulio. This name is different from the name Santifero given for the same person in the previous letter of August 12, 1946.

Chapter 54

The Red Cross Train To Germany

Olga Gladky Verro
As Recounted by Antonina G. Berezhnaya Gladky

The days were going by and there was not yet set the date for the departure from Poland of the convoy train to Germany for the German wives and families.[1] Toward the middle of September I reduced the number of my trips to the market to a minimum and was going there only to buy food for cooking after being sure that there was no news about the train on that day.

Rufin was checking often with the Red Cross office in Katowice. They were positive that the convoy train would definitely depart in the near future. Lately they advised to check with them daily and keep the luggage ready; they were expecting that the train would be available on a very short notice. My tension was increasing with each day that passed in waiting.

It was at that time that I finally received the letter from my daughter mailing me my husband's letter[2] with the Certificate.[3] It was handwritten in German:

Certificate

Herr[4] Orest M. Hladkij,[5] 44 years of age, is working in the Weinheim Puppets Theater Bi-Ba-Bo as a Puppetmaster from the date of July 7, 1946. He is residing at Lindenstrasse, 11, Weinheim, a.d. Bergstrasse, Deutchland.[6]

This certificate was given for the purpose of receiving the travel permit to Germany for his wife Antonina G. Hladkij, 51 years old.

Date: September 25, 1946.

Signature: Dmitri Tschiabrischvili, Theater Manager.

There was no seal of any kind affixed on this Certificate. And it was signed by a person to whom I was mailing the letters for my husband. The funniest thing was the name of his workplace and I was doubtful if it would be valid.

When Rufin came home, I asked him if he considered it to be valid without the seal.

"It is better than nothing," he replied. "It will depend who will be checking it. If he wants to accept it, then it will be valid." He inspected the envelope and said, "Keep this certificate in the envelope, because it has German post stamps, the postage seal with the date, and the name of the town from where it was mailed, and the address is corresponding to that on the so-called Certificate. They complement each other for the identification purposes."

He reflected for a while and with the expression of a wise man on his face added, "If the Polish border police would be checking your documents, they would only be happy that you leave Poland. If the Soviet soldiers will be checking it, they would not be able to read German and would accept anything as long as you have the Red Cross pass. If the American authorities would check it or the German border police, which I doubt very much they would be allowed to check it at this time, they probably would only welcome you."

Lidia smiled satisfied with her husband's smart riddle and said, "*Pani*, remember that the Virgin Mary will be with you all the way to your husband's dwelling door. She wouldn't have shown you the road to follow, if it was not meant for you to join your husband." On his part Rufin was showing satisfaction with his wife's unconditional faith.

For me remained only to agree with both of them and to continue to worry alone when I went to sleep. What could I do, if I am an incorrigible pessimist? However, the reasoning of both spouses attenuated my worry and I slowly fell asleep.

The next day I received the letter[7] from Lala. It was written in German:

September 30, 1946

Dear Mama! Only Mama is always able to forgive to her children. I still have so much

work to do, everything for the winter for me and for Lia. I shall make beautiful and stylish dresses for my little doll. So, Giulio will be triumphant before his mother that Lala is also able to make nice things. But I had to work only at nights, because my little evildoer does not allow me to work during the day.

Our house is very uncomfortable; Lia has so little room to run, she doesn't want to sit and all the time we have to run after her! Now all the illnesses are gone; she has a nice coloring on the round cheeks, and has hard thighs. Yes, she has already six teeth, four up and two down. She calls already very well 'Mamma,' 'Papa', 'Nonna, 'tata', as she calls the children. She understands already a lot. And she is already a little scamp, how she laughs making fun when Giulio and I are kissing. She is so small that when she runs she resembles a little kitten. And how stubborn she already is! When she is outside, she wants to walk alone and there is nothing to do, if one wants to hold her, she screams like a siren.

We are sending you her best up to now photo. In the next letter we will send one for Rufin and *Pani* Lidia. We are so happy to mail you her photo. She came out so natural and we are so pleased that she is healthy and plump.

My hands have healed already. I received thirty injections of medication (*solfoiodzina* and *iodosolfina*).

From Papa I received two copies of letters for you. I think that you have already received the same letters and, therefore, I am not mailing them. As I understood him, he cannot do anything else for you. And until the peace treaty had been signed, I also cannot do anything. Therefore, you yourself should search everywhere to come either to us, or to him. And he has already now the possibility to travel, but he had waited all this time for you to cross the ocean together. And we have only hope in you and in Rufin to find your way out of Poland.

It seems to me, that it is wasteful to write separate letters for you and for Rufin, because you also write one letter together and read our letters together as one family.

Well Rufin, how are you? In two to three years you could come to Italy, because now the life is so much disrupted and uncomfortable. One must wait until everything will be in order and then in a short time you could see several places. And we would be a little bit wealthier then we are now.

From September 8 to 11, in our home was Bruno with his wife. With the next letter we will send you their photo.

For this spring we have to find for us a place to live, because it is very difficult for me to live in such a big family. Only the work for our three men takes so much time that I have no time to make something for me or for my little one. It is difficult, especially because we are very different in our characters as well as in our habits.

Mama, you have to write some recipes for cooking preserves,
marinades, and a little bit of baking cakes and cookies. Ask also *Pani* Lidia, if you are out of practice now.

I have already figured it out, if I could not find for me some work in an office, I shall find a sewing and patternmaking school and it should give me a background for the children's clothing. Then I could work at home and always have my Lia under my eyes.

Giulio always helps me. He doesn't have the time to study. In the evening he must amuse Lia and let the home relax quietly and let us women to do some work. But there are very few men like Giulio!

It is so bad that I didn't receive any books from you. This Pisani came to our house, but he is a big liar. He said that everything was taken at the Polish border during the inspection. We think that it is not true because when we departed there was no inspection at the border. Now you shouldn't send me anything through Italians.

I am beginning to forget all foreign languages, while in Italian I am always getting better and better. With Lia we speak Italian, but later on I would like her to learn also my motherland's language.

Our kisses to Rufin and Pani Lidia. Sincere greetings to family Pietrowski. We embrace you dearly and kiss you.

Yours Lala, Giulio, and little Lia.

As always, I read this letter to Rufin and Lidia and we discussed the news after the supper. First of all, we admired the photo of Lia and commented about her progress in growing up. Then Lidia and I talked about understanding Lala's difficulties living in a large family and about her desire to have a place of her own and to take care only of her daughter and her husband.

Then I switched the discussion to the topic of immediate interest, "Lala didn't receive yet my letter where I wrote her that I have a good chance to join Papa, because she doesn't make any comments about it." Lidia agreed with me.

Rufin reflected, "*Pani*, this opportunity to depart to Germany with the convoy train for the German wives and families came just in the right time. As you can see, your daughter and Giulio couldn't do anything now for you from Italy and your husband has already the opportunity to depart overseas."

Lidia instead voiced her thoughts, "Speaking French, German, and Polish will help *Pani* during the trip when her documents will be checked."

"Don't forget that the Russian language will help her to understand what the Soviet guards say and want," added Rufin.

"The best of all is," I commented, "that there will be many German women and children traveling together and the Soviet guards would not search for the Soviet citizens hiding among them."

On October 23, Rufin, as usual, went to the Red Cross office to find out the news about the departure of the convoy train to Germany. He came home earlier then usual and announced the big news, "The convoy train for the German wives and families is departing tomorrow afternoon from the Station of Breslau."[8] We will come with you all the way to see you off. We have to take early train from Katowice to be there on time."

I was glad that they were coming with me, especially Rufin, in case if there were problems, he could help me to solve them.

Lidia and I went quickly to say good-bye to her parents, her sister, and her brother's family. Everybody wished me a successful trip and all were happy for me. But, all were genuinely sad to see me leave, knowing that probably we would never see each other again. It was the hardest of all to say good-bye to Lidia's mother, who was so kind to me and who was very ill and I knew that she was not expected to live for very long.

While Lidia was preparing supper, I decided to check once more the items I was taking with me. Although my suitcase was ready for long time, I wanted to make it lighter to carry. I showed to Lidia what I was leaving behind and again she promised me to keep it safe until will be possible to mail it to me. Again, as I did this already several times in the last few years, I was leaving most of my possessions behind. But I knew that it was impossible for me to carry the heavy luggage and the practical side of me had won.

Lidia prepared for me some food for the trip and gave me the whole long salami that I bought recently on the market for the family. She said, "You take this for your husband." I placed a little packet with the few pieces of gold jewelry at the bottom of the enameled cup, which we brought from our home in the Ukraine. Then I asked Lidia to give me some butter to cover the gold, to hide it in case of the inspection on the border. I placed all food in a large market bag.

Then I checked all my documents in my purse where I also had the German marks that I had and all the Polish zloty that I earned during this year. I had enough money to probably feed all three of us through the whole winter. I needed it now to pay for the tickets for all three of us from Katowice to Breslau, and for me from Breslau to Mannheim in Germany. The remaining Polish money I decided to give to Lidia at the station when we will be saying good-byes, because at that time it was almost impossible to exchange the currencies of the European countries and I decided not to take them with me.

We spent the rest of the evening in reminiscing the past year that I lived with Rufin and Lidia. All three of us were glad that my dream to join my husband was to become a reality, but we also felt very sad about our separation, because we really got used to live as a family, to depend on each other, and on the contributions each of us provided for the common good.

I felt uncertain and insecure leaving my adoptive family, which provided me with the physical and emotional stability and feeling of belonging after Lala and Giulio had left. But I also felt sorry to leave my friends Rufin and Lidia who had to get along without my help, without my market savvy and hard work, in very difficult economic conditions in the post-war Poland.

On October 24, 1946, the day of my departure to Germany, we got up early in the morning, although we had plenty of time to get to Katowice to catch the train to Breslau. I tidied my room while Lidia was preparing a hearty breakfast, because she anticipated that we would be without food for the

good portion of the day.

I didn't feel eating all that food that she placed on the plate for me, but Lidia prompted me, "*Pani*, you should eat your breakfast, you have a very long trip ahead. Who knows when you will be able to eat a hot meal again? Take the example from Rufin, he is ready to ask for the seconds!"

"Lidia," I replied, "I am so nervous that I have butterflies in my stomach."

"That's why you should put some food in there and it will calm you down," explained Lidia.

I tried to make her happy and forced myself to eat. We finished eating breakfast in silence. It seems each of us was absorbed in own thoughts and didn't want to interfere with those of the others. Rufin interrupted the silence by prompting us while he was donning his coat, "It's time to go! You better hurry, if you don't want to miss the train."

Lidia and I stopped clearing up the table and hurried up to follow his example. Rufin went in my room took my suitcase and walked outside. We heard him talking to the mailman.

As I opened the door, Rufin handed me a letter[9] from my husband. I opened it hastily and quickly glanced through to see if there was anything important. It was a very short letter and the handwriting of his friend was atrocious. I decided to read it slowly and to decipher his French in the streetcar on our way to Katowice:

> Dear Antonina, I have mailed you through Lala a Certificate about my work so you may come here. Answer me if you had received it.
>
> You are writing more often to Lala then to me. This is very good, because she crosschecks our letters and, thanks to this, she may readily send the news to me. But Giulio didn't send me yet his photo.
>
> One of these days I saw Igor. He lives with his 'sister and brother' in a DP[10] camp of UNRRA.[11] They are waiting the date of departure overseas, either to America, to Canada, or to Argentina. When it should be, they don't know yet. At this time they are both working. They are saying that they had lost their Motherland and they must search for an¬other one. They send you their friendly greetings.
>
> I could also go far from here. If something is going to change, I will write to you immediately. In any case, I have here an apartment where we both could live. Here everybody is waiting for you. I hope to see you soon. All our friends send you their friendly greetings. I embrace you very, very dearly. Your Orest."

When I finished reading, Rufin asked me if there was anything new. "No, nothing new," I answered. "Everything that I knew already. The only important thing, he is asking, if I had received his Certificate."

"Put this letter together with his other letters. It might be additional evidence that he is living in Germany," Rufin suggested.

A distance by rail from Katowice to Breslau was about two hundred kilometers. There were lots of passengers in the train, but Lidia and I were lucky to find a place to sit together, while Rufin stood on his feet for a while until he found a place in another compartment. Anyway, we could talk only about things that could not be compromising for my departure.

Lidia asked me, "Write to us immediately at your arrival and tell us everything about your trip."

I asked her, "Mail me the letters from my daughter, if you shall receive them." I also told her, "I would never forget your and Rufin's friendship and hospitality, which meant so much for me during the whole year when I was so far from my family."

Lidia complimented me by saying, "We enjoyed very much your company and appreciated your efforts in contributing to the food provisions for the family."

I was glad to hear from her the recognition of my hard work at the market. Then we talked about her mother's incurable illness and the difficult time for the whole family watching her to slowly fade away. I told Lidia how fond I was of her mother and how sorry I was that such a nice person had to suffer so much. Lidia took my hand and told me with conviction, "It is all in the God's mercy, to make her suffer as little as possible."

And I envied her in that moment for her unconditional faith at such tragic time in the life of her mother, whom she loved so much. After this painful exchange we sat silently for a very long time immersed in our own thoughts.

Rufin came in our compartment and told us to be ready, that Breslau was the next stop of the train. We needed to hurry to buy the tickets for me and we didn't know if we had to stay in line. He put

down my suitcase from the upper shelf and told us to move closer to the exit. We remained standing until the train stopped at the station and Rufin helped us to the platform.

Inside the station Rufin found a Red Cross woman who was checking passes and documents for the convoy train to Germany and brought me to her. She spoke to me in German, "Please, show me your Red Cross pass and the address where you are going." I showed her the pass and envelope with the Weinheim address where were the certificate and the letters from my husband. She checked only the Red Cross pass and said, "Go to that ticket window and buy a one-way ticket to Weinheim, Germany. Then hurry to the convoy train, it is already full and will depart soon."

Rufin told Lidia and me, "Go to buy the ticket and wait for me. I will see where the convoy train is parked."

As we came to the ticket window, a German woman who just bought the ticket asked me, "Are you going to Germany too?"

"Ya," I replied.

Looking at me and at Lidia she asked, "Are you traveling together?"

"No, I am alone," I answered again shortly.

The woman insisted, "I am also alone. I will wait for you."

I purchased the ticket then embraced Lidia and said good-bye to her. We both had tears in our eyes. I took the bundle of Polish zloty from my bag and put it in her hand.

"I have no more use for them," I said, "you keep them for a rainy day."

Lidia looked at the thick bundle of money and said sincerely, "Thank you, *Pani*, thank you." And she kissed me again and I felt her tears on my cheek.

At that moment Rufin came back and said to Lidia, "You stay here and wait for me, because the convoy train is parked very far from here." He grabbed my suitcase and ordered me to follow him in a hurry.

All this time the German woman was discreetly waiting for me at a short distance. I looked at her and said, "Let's go!" And both of us followed Rufin who led the way on the railroad tracks to the convoy train that was parked quite a distance from the station. The cars were already packed full with women standing on the car platforms and even on the steps.

Rufin selected a car where there was some room on the platform and stopped to say good bye to me. He embraced and kissed me on the cheek and said, "Take care of you, *Pani."*

"Thank you, Rufin, for everything you have done for me," I said. "I would never forget it."

Somewhat embarrassed Rufin asked me, "How about the Polish money, *Pani*? Are you taking them to Germany? You cannot exchange them there." I didn't expect to hear from him such tactless question. He probably was expecting that I would offer him the money of my free will. He obviously was so eager to get hold of my hard earned money that, when he saw me ready to depart without giving them to him, he impudently asked me about them.

I answered him calmly with a touch of innocent despise in my voice, "I gave already all the money to Lidia."

He became embarrassed and said, "Thank you, thank you, *Pani*. I am sorry, I didn't know."

At that moment the conductor came, checked our tickets, and said, "You may board the train. It will depart very soon."

Rufin helped me first and then he helped the German woman to climb up the steps and pushed our suitcases on the car platform. "Take care of you!" he said once more. "I have to go, Lidka is waiting for me." I answered to him in German, "*Auf Wiedersehen.*" And he left.

"It is good not to be alone during the trip," said German woman, who adopted me as her companion. "Let's keep close to each other."

"Very well," I answered, "I agree with you."

We were standing on the car platform and the other women who were ahead of us were not moving inside. My newly found companion commented. "It seems that the car is packed and we will be traveling standing here."

"It will be cold here when the train starts moving," I replied.

Shortly after we boarded the train the conductors began to give signals with their whistles and the convoy train slowly began to move. It seemed that the movement of the train forced the passengers

inside to find better standing positions and we were able to get at least behind the door and find the place to stand
between the door and the first window supporting ourselves against the wall. Although we had our suitcases on which we could sit, there was no room to do it with the women standing too close to us in the passageway.

At the Polish-German border the train stopped and several men of the Polish border guards forced themselves into each car. They knew that this was a convoy train of the German wives and families and were very rude in checking the luggage of their former enemies. They dipped their hands into the bags and suitcases of the helpless women; they grabbed without scruples everything they liked, as if it was their right, and collected it in the big bags. They behaved more like the outlaw train robbers then the law enforcement agents.

Standing close to the door I was among the first ones to be searched. One of the guards came close to me and dipped his hands into my big market bag where I had my food and the items that I could need on the road to have them handy in case of rain or cold weather. He grabbed my new raincoat and new big woolen kerchief that were on top and then found my good leather handbag and took it too. He continued to dig further and pulled out the cup where I hid the gold jewelry covered with butter.

I began to beg him in Polish "*Pan* Guard, please, my stomach is very ill and the butter is one thing that I can eat." I pulled out from the bottom of my bag the long salami and said, "Take this salami. I cannot eat it. Look how big it is, and leave this little bit of butter for me."

My trick worked, the man took the salami and returned the cup with the butter. I didn't complain any more being scared that he might open my suitcase and take even more things from it. He moved to check the luggage of my German companion and indeed asked her to open her suitcase and rummaged through all her clothes taking several items. All women standing nearby watched this injustice in silence, as if it was none of their business what was happening to their neighbors and compatriots. No one wanted to attract attention being afraid to provoke the anger of the insatiable Polish guard and to become his next victim.

After this pilferage ended and the Polish border guards left with their booty, the car filled with the voices of the indignant German women. Some were complaining with their neighbors and enumerated the items taken from them, the others were cursing loudly at the Polish men, and some were crying. The train moved and I heard somebody saying, "Thank God, soon we will be in Germany."

It was a long, long trip and the convoy train was traveling through German territory without stopping. It was just reducing the speed on the railway stations. In one place the train had to cross a very large river on the bridge that was being restored after being damaged during the war. There the train was traveling very slowly, but I could feel the vibrations of the bridge and could see the water from the window. I had the impression that at any moment the bridge would collapse and the train would plunge into the river. After the bridge the train picked up speed and traveled all night through German territory. Through the window I could see suddenly appearing and as quickly disappearing the lights of the railroad stations and the slowly appearing sea of lights of the big cities.

My legs were so tired from standing for so many hours that I could not feel them any more. My German companion suggested to me that I could lean with my back against the wall and slide down slowly to sit on my suitcase. Although this was not very comfortable either, with the women standing too close to me, but in the new position I could nap during the night and to endure to the end of the trip.

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1. As recounted by Antonina G. Berezhnaya Gladky and from her letters.
2. Orest M. Gladky, letter to his daughter Olga [in Russian] Mannheim, Germany, October 7, 1946, private collection of Olga Gladky Verro.
3. Certificate [in German] Mannheim, Germany, September 25.
4. Mister [in German].
5. German spelling of the Ukrainian spelling of a name Gladky.
6. The address of Dmitri Tschiabrischvili, a friend of Orest M. Gladky.
7. Olga Gladky Verro, letter to her mother [in German] Turin, Italy, September 30, 1946, private collection of Olga Gladky Verro.
8. Name of the town in German. In Polish the name is Wroctaw.
9. Orest M. Gladky, letter to his wife [in French] Mannheim, Germany, n.d. , private collection of Olga Gladky Verro.

10. Displaced Persons during the WW II.

11. United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration established by the Allies in 1944 to provide help on the territories freed from the German occupation.

Chapter 55

In Allies Occupied Germany At Last

Olga Gladky Verro
As Recounted by Antonina G. Berezhnaya Gladky

The next day the convoy train finally arrived to the station of Hanover and all passengers, women and children, were directed to the big former German camp that now was under the patronage of the English.[1] They checked only our Red Cross passes and registered only our names and the town where we were going. We were told that we could find for ourselves an empty bunk bed in the barracks and that we may stay in the camp and have some food from the kitchen until we depart to the cities of our destination to join our husbands. Many women and children, including my German companion and me, were so tired from the trip that we fell asleep as soon as we lay down on the bunk beds to rest.

When I woke up, my companion told me that we could find the information about our trains, or any other question we may have in the office. There I found out that to travel to Weinheim I had to request my husband to send me a document called *Zuzugebescheinigung* that would allow me to go from the English to the American zone of occupation.

I wrote immediately a short letter to my husband on the address of his friend in Weinheim asking him to mail me this document. I also wrote a letter to Lala and Giulio notifying them that I successfully arrived in Hanover, Germany. I also I wrote to Rufin and Lidia who were very interested in how my trip would end up.

Having the roof, bed, and food that Lidia gave me; I decided to wait in the camp for a document from my husband. The conditions in the camp resulted to be worse than they seemed to me on the first day. There was no heat in the barracks, no hot water, and the food was scarce and almost worse then we had in Oelsnitz in the *Ostarbaitern* German camp during the war. I got a sore throat and, after standing on my feet in the train, my sciatica began to bother me. I waited for almost one week, but there was no news from my husband, not even a letter.

On November 1, 1946 I decided to take a risk and board the train to Weinheim with the ticket that I purchased already in Breslau. And everything went without any problems. No one bothered me or checked my documents, except the train ticket. I asked the conductor to tell me when I had to get off the train.

I arrived in Weinheim at night, toward the morning. On the station some people explained how to get to the house of Dmitri Tschabrischvili, my husband's friend,. It was not as hard to find it as I expected because of the darkness.

I knocked for a while on the fence gate, until I saw a light, one of the windows opened and a man asked in German what I wanted. I answered also in German, "I am the wife of Orest Gladky."

"A-a-a, we were waiting for you," he said now in Russian. "I will be right out."

He saluted me and did let me in the house. There he told me to sit on the chair in the kitchen and wait until he would get dressed. I sat there for a very long time, at least it seemed to me very long. Finally, he came all dressed up and said, "I will bring you right away with the first streetcar to your husband. He is waiting for you with impatience."

During the trip he recounted to me a little bit about my husband's life in the UNRRA camp. We arrived at the UNRRA camp's gate early in the morning and my husband's friend asked the guard to call my husband and tell him that his wife is waiting for him at the gate.

As we were waiting I observed that the camp resembled the hamlet in Laband with the apartment buildings, rather than the standard wooden barracks of the typical German camp.

Orest came immediately and as he saw me, the tears began to run on his cheeks and he was able only to say, "*Tonyechka*[2]*... Tonyechka...*" And we embraced each other.

My husband's friend admired our reunion scene and said, "Well, I told you that I will bring your woman here. I delivered her to you all in one piece. My job is accomplished."

"Thank you very much," my husband and I said together.

"Good-bye my friends," he said. "When you settle down, come to see me."

"Good-bye. And thank you again," we said.

I told my husband that I waited and waited to receive documents from him and was ready to take a risk to depart without it hoping that everything would come out all right. But at the last moment I received his Certificate that he sent through our daughter. It was required to have it for anybody who was returning to Germany but nobody actually checked out.

My husband took my suitcase and led me in his room. He was acting as a real host who was giving hospitality to the guest of honor. He didn't allow me to do anything saying to me, "You rest now, *Tonyechka*, you are tired after the long trip. You deserve to rest after the hard work you have done until now."

I was indeed exhausted from the difficult physical and emotional conditions during the trip and weakened by sore throat and a touch of sciatica that didn't improve in the cold barrack in the Hanover camp. Therefore, I allowed myself to rest in bed and be cuddled and pampered by my husband. However, we talked incessantly, because we had so much to tell to each other about all that happened to us during almost two years since he left us in Laband on January 23, 1945.

The next day on November 4, 1946I read all the letters that our daughter wrote to her father in Russian, in which I could understand many new details that she didn't write to me in French or in German. Immediately I wrote a letter[3] to her and Giulio telling them:

"You certainly would be surprised that your mother and grandmother in ten days found herself together with your father and grandfather. But this is true. I was a French woman, my husband was a German, and I was traveling with the Red Cross convoy train of German wives and families who were joining their husbands in Germany. The trip was very difficult. I had lost many items during the search on the border. The Polish border guards were very angry. But it was understandable."

I wrote Lala and Giulio that my departure happened unexpectedly, as it did happen with them. Notwithstanding, that I sold all my old rags and bought better things, I couldn't take it all with me and I left a lot of nice things with Rufin and Lidia. True, they said that it shall be all kept in safekeeping and, if there shall be the possibility, they would send it to Italy or to me. But I would have preferred that they sell it all and sent the money to them when it will be possible. .I have left them also lots of money.In Breslau they have taken some more of my stuff, because it was impossible to take it all with me. And now I don't regret it, because the Polish border guards would have taken it anyway.

During the trip the Polish border guard has taken from me many nice things, but I was able to convince him to trade with me the cup with the butter, where at the bottom I hid my gold items, for big salami I had. I was traveling under the illegal conditions and it did cost me lots of money.

I told them that in general they departed under better conditions, at the right time, and quietly. I was only sorry that they didn't take with them more thing that could have been useful to them now.

I reassured Lala and Giulio, "Don't you worry about thinking that I was a burden for your friends. They would miss me, because they had fattened themselves on my provisions. Everybody was telling me about it, I am sure that they would remember me and would never forget me. With Rufin and Lidia we parted as friends. They saw me off as far as Breslau, Rufin up to the train, even if it was very difficult."

Although I was not registered yet in the UNRRA camp, I lived there with my busband in his room. I was resting but as always was restless. It seemed to me very strange to be without work and I was already searching for something to do. After living with Rufin and Lidia, it is was a big change in my life, in general and in particular. But we are used to change.

For now we had enough food, because my husband was waiting for me and saved something. Now he was courting me as the young bride treating me with food and doing all housework by himself. It's true that after very difficult conditions in the German camp in Hanover I got sick and decided to lie in bed with sciatica.

I couldn't yet decide on my impression and I couldn't even tell myself yet, if I did the right thing to come here, but morally I felt satisfaction and, besides, it was also closer to my daughter. And this had also tempted me. The change in my life is tremendous. The conditions here are similar to those as we were living in the beginning in Laband, sharing the apartment with the others. Even the room is similar, only with one window and with the iron stove.

When my husband tried to register me in the camp's office as his wife, there was a problem because we didn't dare to use our original documents, which all have been issued in the Soviet Ukraine.

But in this UNRRA camp were accepted only DP's, who were either Polish or Ukrainians from Poland. In order to be accepted in this camp, all Ukrainians from the Soviet Ukraine, including my husband and his brother, had to state that they had lost their documents and they declared themselves for registration as the Ukrainians from Poland.

This was the only way that they could protect themselves from being transferred to the camp for the Soviet citizens. It was some kind of agreement that the Soviets made with the other Allies. Soviet NKVD was in charge of those camps and deported all captured "home", which meant to the concentration camps in the far regions of the Soviet Union.[6]

Therefore, my husband registered himself by changing spelling of his name as Orest Hladkyj (the name spelled in Ukrainian); born in 1902; and place of birth as Stanislawov, Poland; and residencies: lived in Stanislawov until 1920 and then from 1920 to 1924 lived in Lwov, Poland; from 1924 to 1943 lived in Sosnowice, Poland; from 1943 to 1945 lived in Labedi,[7] Poland."

As I arrived in the UNRRA camp where my gusband was, I stayed there on the illegal condition. We had to prove that I am the wife of my husband On November 7, 1946 I wrote to Lala and Giulio a letter[8] asking them to help us in this matter. I asked her if it was possible to send us a notarized certificate that shall be exactly of the following content:

"On the bases of the birth certificate of Olga Hladkyj, born on January 14, 1923, Orest Hladkyj, born on October 29, 1902 and Antonina Hladka, born on February 23, 1895, are her parents."

I warned her not to add anything to the text that I wrote, neither the nationality, nor the place of her birth, only what I wrote.

We were hoping that we would get this document soon since their last letter was in the mail only two weeks. I was so happy that now I would receive their letters quicker and more often.

They talk here that we may travel far from here to build the new life. Knowing how it was hard for my daughter in Italy, I asked her opinion, if she also would like to go somewhere else to live and to make the trip together with us. I had a secret desire to be together with her in the future, but I didn't know how it could be accomplished.

I certainly wouldn't want to depart too far, hoping that I could eventually see my daughter, Giulio, and my little granddaughter Lia whom I could only imagine from the big photo. If we shall travel far, we probably will not see each other again. Therefore, I was thinking that before a departure across the ocean I would try to make my way to Italy to see them. But if it is not possible, what we can do? Our situation here was very uncertain.

About Lala's and Giulio's departure with us, I wrote, "I agree with your father—we shall see about it. We shall be the pioneers and in general this is all for now very problematic, it is all in the air."

They had decreased the food rations in the camp, and in addition I am on the illegal condition here. However, even under these conditions I would like to find for me some kind of work, because I cannot live without work.

I read and reread all letters my daughter wrote to her father and learned many new things about her life since had more details written in Russian.

I am looking all the time at Lia's photo[4] that I like very much where Giulio is with Lia, a picture with a contrast, a giant Giulio and a tiny daughter. Beautiful! Only Giulio could have thought to do it.

I congratulated Lala and Giulio with the birthday of their daughter Lia, and Lia, with her first birthday. I asked them to kiss her immediately and tell her that it is her *Baba* that is kissing her, and wish her health, from which depends all the rest in life.

As I was writing my letter, I realized how terrible I am talking and writing in Russian—I forgot it and here I have to talk Ukrainian and Russian. I imagined that my daughter probably had completely forgotten to speak Russian, too.

I was already twice downtown in Mannheim. The first time on November 4, I went there with my husband's roommate who lives in a separate room. I wanted to explore a possibility to find some work with the Americans. And the second time I went with Igor, to the home of Dmitri Zakharovich Tschabrischvili to see if there were any letters from Lala.

My daughter wrote us that we should begin to normalize our life. And I replied her that it was impossible. Our life was in a constant wandering from the time we got married. But I am happy that we are now together with her father and neither he, nor I would be bearing difficulties alone. But, isn't

it true that by this time we should be used to such life?

My husband also wrote to my daughter a letter that was very similar in content to mine, but with some minor personal details. We mailed both letters together and waited now for a certificate, which we hoped she and Giulio could send to us. Meanwhile we were exploring other alternatives to prove that we were husband and wife for the purpose of registering me as a wife in the UNRRA camp in which my husband was living and working.

Here are some things that he wrote in his letter of November 4, 1946:

> My dear ones! On November 1, as the bright sun, Mama appeared before me. Thank God, we are together and I hope, that in the near future we all, you and we, could gather together again. We have information that in January would depart the first party of DP's to Argentina. Maybe we are already blessed by God and we will depart there too. But now Mama is with me and I don't have to worry about anything.
>
> My restless wife has already gone downtown. She is planning to find some job. But I want her to rest at least for a while. True, now there is a question of official registration, which is very long and I don't know if it is possible, but we need to try. I am sure that Mama would be able to succeed. But all of this should not influence our departure, if any.
>
> For you also will be easier now, less letters to write, one for both of us. I hope that our correspondence would be more intensive now.
>
> My paper about the '*Puppenmaister*' had decided the departure. I think that I mailed it to you for Mama. I don't know how I didn't think earlier about it. But, thank God, it came on time anyway.
>
> How is your health? Lia's? Giulio's? And you work as usual? And, you are tired, as usual? Oh, how I would like to help you! But it is too far from here. That's why I would like that Giulio would think about the question of your emigration from Italy. He is a young man, seems to be energetic, and work is not a disgrace.
>
> I am not talking obviously, that we have to live together because you would want to be a mistress of your house. But living close to us could be definitely very pleasant and practical. I am writing about the pleasant closeness based on what Mama told me about her life together with you and Giulio.
>
> Of course, everything depends on Giulio. If he is taking a sober view of the present situation, if he believes in his own strength, if he wants to make his life more pleasant, with more material security, more safety, then, I think, he would decide to leave. Why not to try a fortune? You know, we have also left home to look for better life and happiness. And you have found yours already. And now, the three of you may look for new things if not the new happiness, but prosperity. The essence of the human life consists in this search.
>
> Send us also yours and Giulio's photos. They give us many happy moments. You are very stingy for sending them. We will try with Mama to find out the way to make them too and will send them to you. However, here this is very difficult to do.
>
> Dear girl, everybody here is sending you their regards. I kiss you dearly. My regards to family Verro.
>
> Don't forget to write to us, you know we are now together. Again I kiss you all dearly, you, Giulio, and Lia.
>
> Your Papa. Mannheim, November 4, 1946.

My husband told me about a long journey across Germany that he and his brother endured while fleeing from the advancing Red Army.[9] I also read his remorseful thoughts recorded in a notebook[10] that he kept during that time. It was very difficult to read it and recognize that my husband finally realized how much his political past and uncompromising views have determined the course of our lives.[11]

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1. As recounted by Antonina G. Berezhnaya Gladky and from her letters.
2. A diminutive of the name Antonina [in Russian].
3. Antonina G. Gladky, letter to her daughter and son-in-law [in Russian] Mannheim, Germany. November 4, 1946, private collection of Olga Gladky Verro.

4. From the photograph of Lia with Giulio.

5. Orest M. Gladky. A letter to his daughter and son-in-law [in Russian]. Mannheim, Germany. November 4, 1946, private collection of Olga Gladky Verro.

6. In 1946 in the United Nations Eleanor Roosevelt debated Soviet delegate head, Andrei Vishinsky, regarding WWII refugee repatriation about the treatment of the Soviet citizens who were repatriated forcefully to the USSR and were punished by sending them to the concentration camps. The Delegate of the USSR to the United Nations, Comrade Vishinsky, replied to this by branding all the Soviet citizens who were in Germany as "…traitors, enemies of the people, and war criminals who must expiate their guilt with heavy forced labor..."

7. Laband [in German].

8. Antonina G. Gladky, letter to her daughter and son-in-law, Mannheim, Germany, November 7, 1946, private collection of Olga Gladky Verro.

9. Oresr M. Gladky. "Putyevoy Journal" ["Travel Itinerary"].

10. Oresr M. Gladky. Notebook kept during a journey across Germany, 1945-1946) See the chapters "Woe Is Me!" and "A Man Reborn."

11. See Part Three.

The Happy News About My Parents Reunion

Olga Gladky Verro

November 10, 1946. Turin

My dear Mama and Papa!

I cannot believe that I can begin a letter with such greeting but it is true. And my first thought is to thank the Almighty for His mercy and help. My daughter is already one year old and it is one year that we left Mama and almost two years since our parting with my father. How much was endured... Fear, despair, unknown, and uncertainty have harassed and worn us out... Very strange months were gone by... Unbound happiness intertwined with sorrow... But He didn't leave us not even for one minute and worked wonders and saved us everywhere.

Dear Papka, first of all, you should forgive me for my inattentiveness – I didn't congratulate you yet with your birthday. It is already one week as *Giul'ka* is after me for this reason, and he is right by saying, "You are always saying 'I am busy' you should find the time for such things and leave everything else." But I am always the same. In the evening of November 29 we were talking about your birthday and remembered you and Igor, but only on October 10 I took a pen in my hand.

All week Lia was not well and on a diet and had lost weight. She has always some problems with the digestion—sometimes she throws up, sometimes has constipation, sometimes diarrhea. It seems that she does not digest well something. Of course, the nutrition with dry milk probably is the culprit. But she is strong and this helps her all the time.

She understands already everything, babbles all the time. Her preferred words sound like this, "Kudya, kudya, kudya," "mama," "nonyo," "nonya," (grandfather and grandmother), "no-no-no," "tata" (a girl), and "Nanna" (Yvana, her friend.) In addition she has many variations according to her mood. Then she waives her hand and says "mau-may" which means "ciao," and "amn" for "grazie" which means "thank you." She knows her potty and brings it to me when I ask her to do it; she dances as soon as she hears music, and she likes to play horsy. Well, it's enough you know yourself that one can go on without end describing the little ones.

Could you imagine, that I sew everything myself for Lia and for me. I finished sewing a winter coat for Lia and now next in turn a dress for her and winter underwear. There is plenty of work to fall dead-tired but it doesn't move fast enough and it makes me upset. But I must have patience. It is all because of the crowdedness and because of the quirks of the family members and the day's routine. I probably have written already the sequence in the days activities. The morning is spent taking care of Lia, walking to buy milk, bread, and wine, diapers, putting the bedroom in order, and picking up all the "rugs" (clothing left from the previous evening).

My father-in-law goes to work at 12:30 pm and eats lunch at noon; Domenico arrives at 1:00 pm for lunch and Lia eats approximately at the same time, and the three of us [Giulio, his mother, and I] eat in-between.

From 2 pm to 3:30 pm and sometimes even until 4 pm the dishes are washed, kitchen is cleaned, floor is washed, and the supper is cooked and Lia eats one more time. Therefore, I cannot start doing anything else until 4:30 pm and until 6 pm could go ahead doing things that need to be done. After that arrives Giulio and we eat; at 8 pm arrives Domenico and at 9 pm the father-in-law; and when the dishes are washed it's already close to 10 pm. And if Lia is already sleeping, there are about 2 to 3 hours of work.

We were lucky, we found a little bed for Lia from Giulio's friends. They are very nice family; he is an engineer and was a teacher that Giulio had before[in the school preparing radiotelegraphers for the military]. They like Giulio and we visit them sometimes. By the way, they have some rich relatives in Argentina. This could be helpful—life is complicated and one needs to have contacts with people.

We are hoping this spring to get out of the family, but a hope is only that God will help us. For now we are thinking to settle in Italy, but if it will be necessary, Giulio will not leave me. Every day we are becoming closer more and stronger; and I can tell very boldly that there are not too

many women in the world who are as happy as I am. Mama knows this and she will tell you about it.

I didn't know what to think because I wasn't receiving any more letters from Mama. Your letter, Papa, returned to me good spirits. Now I am waiting with impatience your letters. *Mamusya*, write about all your travels. Our dear ones, write us, we are waiting. Giulio and Lia are kissing you dearly and congratulating you, Papa. Greetings from the family Verro. My dear ones, I am embracing you tightly and kissing you. Your misbehaving *Lyal'ka*.

Chapter 56

The Happy News About My Parents Reunion

Olga Gladky Verro

November 10, 1946. Turin

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many women in the world who are as happy as I am. Mama knows this and she will tell you about it.

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Chapter 56a

The Under-baked Bread Buns

Olga Gladky Verro, 1948

My mother-in-law's moods were unpredictable. Some days she was nice and we worked together smoothly, managing household chores according to the established routine. But on some days no matter what I did, nothing was done as she expected and she continually reproached me that I was doing things "in a foreign way" and complaining, "Do I have to do everything over the 'right way'?"

On those days I was asking God for what sins He was punishing me and couldn't find the answer. I wished to leave that apartment but there was no way we could do it—there was a scarcity of places to rent in town and we could not afford not only the rent prices but the enormous cost to pay the landlords for the so-called *buon-entrata*, or the right to rent the apartment. And, although Giulio had very good pay, he was giving everything to his mother and we couldn't even think about saving little by little for this purpose—all was used for the family needs according to what she considered to be the priorities.

It was the second year that we lived in the family. Lia was already walking and required less supervision. We agreed with Giulio that without my working we would never be able to have the money for *buon-entrata*. We decided to ask Mamma if she could take care of Lia if I found some job and could save the money for this purpose. She agreed that it was a good idea and Giulio began to inquire about job openings in places he was familiar with.

The unemployment in Italy after the war was very high and one needed connections and references from important people to find the jobs. Giulio was reluctant to look for the factory jobs for me. One day he found a place where they were looking for an Italian-German translator and they asked me to take a test. Although I already spoke Italian without difficulty, I had no formal education in Italian language and couldn't qualify for that job. Another job that Giulio was able to find was at the stockings factory but I was disqualified because of my eyesight – wearing glasses. Time was going by quickly and Giulio's search had not produced any other openings.

I was frustrated and one day at the end of March 1947, when we finished our afternoon chores I put my coat on and told my mother-in-law that I was going out too look for a job in the neighborhood.

Not too far from where we lived on the Corso Novara, going down in the direction toward the hills and the Mount Superga, there were many factories. That's where I went to look that day. I was not discriminating—I entered all that I found on my way—large or small, clean or dirty buildings or courtyards, friendly or unfriendly office employees. Everywhere was the same answer, "There are no openings now. Leave your name and address—we will notify you when we need workers." So, I left my name and address as they asked and, discouraged, was returning home.

> It was a cold and windy day. As I walked from the glue factory, the last place I visited, I had my coat collar up protecting my nose from breathing the terrible smelling air coming from its chimney. I left my name there, too. I was walking immersed in my thoughts, "Oh, how I would like to have my own quiet little corner but... we cannot afford it." And I prayed, God, "I don't care to work even there, as long as they offer me the job, Please God, help me to find the job! Any job…No matter how unpleasant or difficult it could be. Please, help me to find the job…"

Suddenly I heard someone calling my name, "Signora Verro, is it you?" I looked in that direction across the street—it was Signor Bargero returning home from work—the street where he lived was just around the corner from there. One more minute and he would have turned into it. He walked across the street and saluted me.

"What are you doing here," he asked.

"Well, I went to all the factories located on this street looking to find a job. We need to find the apartment and without me working we cannot save the money needed for it—they are asking from sixty to one thousand liras for the *buon-entrata* and about one thousand liras per month for rent. It is impossible for us to save so much money and to pay for rent without me working."

"Did you find anything here?"

"Well, they took my name and address everywhere I stopped by. And at the glue factory they told

me that they would notify me if they need workers."

He asked in disbelief, "Did you go also to the glue factory? It is a very dirty job there."

"I don't care," I said resolutely," if they give me the job, I will take it! We need to have our own apartment and there is no other way—I need to have the job."

"Well, good luck to you," he said, "but try to select a better place than the glue factory."

We saluted each other and I asked him to give my regards to his wife and daughter, whom I didn't see for a while.

Many weeks went by after that day when I looked in the neighborhood for the job. No results whatsoever, nobody notified me that they needed workers. No hope. Although Giulio was trying to reassure me that eventually we will find the job and the apartment, he didn't have to live all day with his mother and, I think, couldn't fully understand how depressing it was for me. He had learned from childhood obedience and how to deal with his mother's changeable moods. He genuinely loved her and was able to compromise or sometimes to dismiss her unreasonable demands by giving her a hug or a kiss on the cheek. But I grew up with parents who respected me and my needs and I couldn't get used to the dictatorial way my father-in-law and mother-in-law treated me. And my nerves were getting more and more stretched. And there was always so much to do for the whole family.

In a letter to my mother written on the fifth of May 1947 I wrote:

> It seems that I didn't write to you for an entire century. I am dashing around like a squirrel in the wheel but it seems that I am not doing enough. Of course, with our big family there is enough work and I simply have to steal the time for sewing. In addition, the weather has not cooperated; instead of a spring summer has begun. In April it got up to 30.5 C, even for them it was very strange.
>
> But the things that are happening to Giulio trouble me and this is happening already the second time. Last night I was not feeling well and I called on him—when he came close to the bed in the dark, he fainted and fell on the floor. When this happened the first time, the doctor made a thorough examination but couldn't find any illnesses. His diagnosis was: "General weakness, sensitive character, and in the past he probably had some kind of fearful experience that now is manifesting in this way." He suggested that he needs tranquility and general reinforcement of the organism. But in our family one cannot find tranquility.

On the first Saturday in the beginning of May, 1947 my mother-in-law was sulky from early in the morning, and did everything in ill humor and all for trifling things. She was late coming back from the market and in order to start cooking, she didn't go to buy bread as she usually did every day.

I went with her several times to the bakery and was embarrassed to hear how overbearing she was with the baker.

"Don't cheat me today," she would tell him, "Yesterday you gave me the under-baked buns. My husband was furious with me—with his dentures he couldn't chew them—they were all sticky inside."

"Madama," the baker would reply, "I could never make you happy, you are the only one who complains all the time. I make the best bread in the neighborhood."

"Well, you don't know my husband, if he said the buns were under-baked, it means they were raw and under-baked—I couldn't argue with him!"

I could see that the baker dreaded just to see her entering the shop. She would demand the buns with the nicest crust by pointing to each, "Give me that one over there. Yes. And the other one next to it.… No, no, not the one you are holding—my husband wouldn't like that—it is too pale."

"Madama," the baker would reply, "they all came out of the oven at the same time, they are all baked well."

The morning that my mother-in-law was late from the open market she ordered me to go to the bakery to buy the bread.

"Please don't forget," she instructed me, shaking her forefinger right under my nose, "you should demand the baker to give you the well-baked buns. Tell him that they are for Madama Verro. He knows

what kind of bread to give me. And watch what he gives you, if the bun is with the pale crust, tell him to exchange it for the ones with the right color crust."

That's what I told the baker and it seems to me that he was giving me the nice buns and there was no need to complain. That's until I entered the apartment and my mother-in-law asked me to show her the buns.

"Dio mio!" she screamed throwing all buns on the table. "Couldn't you do anything right! Didn't you see what he was giving you? They are all pale as the kitchen wall! Wait until Babbo comes home and sees those buns, he will be mad as hell! You better bring that bread back and tell the baker to exchange it."

"Mamma," I interrupted her, "they look all right to me."

"I told you to bring them back and ask him to exchange them." She ordered, "And they better be good with the right color crust."

Lia came close and looked at both of us, not understanding what was going on. She only understood that her grandmother was accusing her mother of doing something wrong.

"I am not going back, Mamma." I replied calmly, "If you don't like the buns, you go and bring them back."

She didn't expect from me such answer and furiously grabbed one bun and threw it on the floor. Then she began to utter all kinds of accusations against me.

"You are good for nothing, one cannot delegate you even a simple chore of buying bread. My poor son, he wants to have an apartment and to live with you—you will ruin him and my little girl with your foreign ways!.. My poor son, look what kind of a woman he found in the foreign country. He had so many nice girls here who would marry him at once if he just asked them… One girl was sending him the letters all smelling with expensive perfume… Even his fiancée was able to cook, clean the house, and sew anything, even the men's pants…"

She continued her accusations and complaints about me until I screamed at her, "Mamma, stop it!" Then I grabbed Lia in my arms and ran into the bedroom leaving my mother-in-law to continue her long winded speech for some time.

Tenderly holding my little daughter in my arms and walking back and forth from the kitchen door to the window, I cried. Seeing that her mother was in distress Lia began to cry, too. I calmed her down by lulling her and telling her in a soothing voice, "Dear girl, today is Saturday, your Papà would be home soon and everything will be all right." Just hearing the name "Papà" was enough to calm her down. So we waited in the bedroom until Giulio came home from work.

As Giulio opened the entrance door he was overwhelmed with his mother's complaints. I could hear only the fragments, "My poor son… my poor Giulio… your foreign wife is good for nothing… one cannot send her even to buy the bread… look at those under-baked buns….I was right to reprimand her, but she raised her voice at me and hid herself in the bedroom. …The table is not set and your father will be home soon." She was going on and on.

Then I heard Giulio saying, "What are you complaining about? What is wrong with this bread?"

"Don't you see, it is under-baked!"

"Mamma, don't exaggerate, you don't know how the under-baked bread looks like. It is the kind of bread I, your son, ate for two years as a prisoner of war. You are making an issue out of nothing."

"About nothing! Wait until Babbo comes, you will hear his complaining that it is raw inside and he cannot chew it. And your wife…"

Giulio interrupted her brusquely, "Mamma, it is enough! Stop complaining about Lala. It is not enough that you complained so much about Bianca until Domenico left her? Do you want to do to me what you have done to him, to separate me from my wife?"

"Are you accusing me for your brother's leaving his wife?" she screamed, "Remember, your brother got the sixteen-years-old girl pregnant and it was I who insisted that he marry her. Your father and Domenico wanted only to recognize the paternity of the child."

"Maybe so, but after they were married, you never stopped to complain that she was 'vain and good for nothing, that she couldn't cook, sew, or take care of the house, that her mother was doing everything.' Domenico told me that he couldn't stand any more to hear your complaints about Bianca."

"This is preposterous, to hear such accusations from my son." And she began cursing him. Giulio couldn't endure after she slandered him and me with so many disgusting accusations. And then his father came home. I could hear from the bedroom that he also began to shout like madman. Luckily, by this time Lia was sleeping. Giulio came to the bedroom and told me to go to the very nice neighbor, Triestina, and stay there until they calmed down.

When I returned, they suddenly began shouting again and the father slapped Giulio on the cheek. After that Mother stated, “If you wouldn’t returned home from the war, I would have suffered less than being wronged by you in such a way.”

Hearing such words from his mother was too much for Giulio, who was always very restrained and patient. He couldn’t hold back and got carried away.

“Well, I’ve had enough! You wished that I had never got home—we are getting out of here now!” Then he said to me, “Lala, put your coat on—we are leaving this place right now.”

“Lia is sleeping. Are we leaving her here?” I asked.

“Don’t worry, she will be fine,” replied Babbo who by this time calmed down and seemed to be surprised by Giulio’s decision to leave.

“Where are you going?” Mother asked, revealing her worry.

“Never mind, I have my weekly pay in my pocket—there are plenty of rooms in the hotels.”

Giulio opened the kitchen door and allowed me to get out first. We encountered Domenico on the staircase. Wondering, he asked, “Where are you going?”

“We are getting out of here,” replied Giulio, “You will hear what happened from our dear mother.”

“Do you need some money?” asked Domenico.

“No, I have my weekly pay with me. But keep in mind—I may need it in the near future. Ciao!”

We walked out of the apartment building in silence and started to talk only when we were already on Corso Palermo. “There is a cheap hotel not very far from here,” said Giulio, “We could stay for a few days there until we find a furnished room somewhere under the mansard roof—those are the only ones that could be found now and it will be very expensive.”

We entered the cheap-looking hotel. “Pay in advance,” the clerk said and asked, “For how many hours?” as if it was the usual way that couples rented the rooms there.

“For one night,” replied Giulio. “But we may stay longer if tomorrow we don’t find the room for rent.”

The clerk looked at us with surprise and told Giulio how much it would cost, accepted the money and gave us the key and towels.

The room was on the first floor, it was clean but smelled heavy with tobacco. The bedspread and furniture looked heavily used. The small window with the old curtain looked into the small courtyard obstructed by the high brick wall of the tall building. There was only one chair and we sat on the bed.

Giulio embraced me. “Here we are, *Il dado e tratto,*” he used the famous words of Giulius Ceasar (‘The die is cast—I can’t turn back’).

I wanted to explain to him what happened, but he stopped me, “There is nothing to explain—my mother said enough—she would have preferred me not to return home from Germany and not to know anything about me, if I was dead or alive… I don’t recognize my mother—I never knew her to be like this. But it’s the time for us to get out.”

I washed my face and splashed the cold water in my eyes to freshen up the eyelids swollen from crying. And we solemnly discussed what and how we should do to organize our new life.

“The first thing, we have to do is to ask Mamma and Babbo, Giulio said, “if we could leave Lia with them because there would be very cold under the mansard roof where usually they have only the iron stove. We cannot endanger Lia’s health.”

I was not too happy to leave my daughter with them but accepted his idea that, if they agreed, it would be safer for her.

“The second thing, we have to find for you the job and to save money for the *buon-entrata* if we find some apartment for rent.”

“We are trying to find the job for me for long time. Why do you think that we would find it now?”

“Because, as the saying goes, “When God closes one door, He opens somewhere else the window.”

“We needed it for some time. Why God didn’t open it before?” I asked again.

“Maybe it was not the right time yet.”

“I hope that it is the right time now.”

We remained in the hotel room for a couple of hours talking about all kinds of possibilities to solve our problem. Giulio thought that he could ask to be transferred by STIPEL to work somewhere in a small town where the housing situation was better. Or maybe we should find a place to live in some neighboring village and Giulio could commute with the train to work in the city. Of course, we decided that the furnished room under the mansard roof was the first choice for now—we had no furniture. And then

was the search for any kind of job—Giulio should forget finding work for me work in an office.

In late afternoon we calmed down. Giulio decided to go home and get his pajamas and my nightgown and a change of underwear and clothing for tomorrow and for Monday. I remained in the room and prayed God to help us in any way possible.

Giulio came back empty-handed and all smiling. As soon as he entered the room, he announced in a happy voice, “Dear Lala, you wouldn’t believe when I tell you the news. During our absence came Signor Bargero. He asked us to come this evening to his home to talk about the job he found for you. He said that it should be done quickly.”

“In the person of Signor Bargero God opened another window,” I said.

“My mother said to me, ‘You will be crazy if you would risk to lose this job.’ She was so excited and seems to have completely forgotten the quarrel that we had. She offered to take care of Lia while you are at work, under the condition that we would help her with the chores at home in the evenings, on Saturdays and Sundays. And I agreed. So, let’s go home and thank her for the offer.”

Giulio said that when he came home, the Father had already returned to work. Mother warned Giulio to expect that the things with his father would not change for the better soon and would remain very tense for a while.

That evening we made a visit to Bargero’s. He gave us the good news; he had found for me a job in a small factory. He knew the owner and asked from him a favor to hire me.

“You have to present yourself at eight o’clock Monday morning,” he said, “Here are the address and instructions on how to get there with the streetcar. They will test you and if you can use the screwdriver to assemble small miscellaneous electrical devices, such as switches, plugs, sockets, and outlets, you have the job. Of course, I knew that you can use the screwdriver—you told us about kind of work you did in Germany. According to the promises of the owner, he should place you on the assembly of these items.”

Signora Bargero, as always, was very kind and knowing our situation suggested that now we could borrow the money for the *buon-entrata* and repay the loan monthly with my salary. And she advised us to look for an apartment close to Giulio’s parents so it would be convenient to take Lia to her Nonna. “It will not be easy for you to work this out,” she said, “, but Giulio is a good man and I trust he will help you in everything.”

On Monday I began my job at the factory…

Chapter 56b

Mother-in-Law's Dress

Olga Gladky Verro, 1950

My sewing for Lia and me was not only helpful for our budget but showed me the possibilities for earning some money if only I could find a way to learn how to make patterns and advanced sewing techniques. At that time there were no commercial patterns sold, except some patterns included as the monthly supplements in women's magazines, and there was no choice of style or what kind of clothing was available that month. And one needed to know how to adjust them to individual measurements.

During my visits to Signora Bargero she supplied me with some of the patterns for children's and women's clothing that she preserved through the years of subscribing to the magazines. She felt that I was sewing pretty well without ever having learned the skills from anybody. I told her that I was handy with the needle from the time I sewed for my doll and that I observed my grandfather tailoring men's clothing. She told me that she knew someone who was teaching sewing and pattern making in her home. She arranged for me to attend the Rosetta Sampo Fashion School. To pay for it I did some sewing for my neighbors, who also took care of Lia and Piero while I was attending classes.

My mother-in-law criticized me, "One doesn't need to attend the school to learn sewing, one needs to work with the dressmaker. Who ever heard that a wife and mother of two small children would go to school?"

She complained to Giulio; "Your wife is neglecting the children, leaving them with the neighbors. And also neglecting your home. I went several times in the apartment while she was at school—the furniture was not dusted and the bedroom floor needed to be waxed. And when she goes to school after lunch, she leaves the dishes in the sink and the kitchen floor unwashed."

But Giulio was confident that I would succeed and defended my decision to learn. However, he insisted that I get up earlier in the morning and do all the chores so his mother wouldn't have anything to complain about.

Having a mechanical drafting course in Moscow Power Institute was an enormous help in learning, quickly and easily, pattern drafting. My teacher soon put me to helping her draft patterns for her clients and it not only helped me to learn sooner how to draft a variety of styles but also reduced my tuition for more advanced classes. By the time I completed most of the available classes, except for the lingerie and men's clothing, I felt very confident in drafting patterns for any style for ladies and children.

My first customers were my neighbors who helped me to accomplish it: Nina and Ida, both next door neighbors, and a young woman who lived on the other side of the balcony who helped me before with shopping on the market when needed when Piero was a baby and who also had a little girl that played with Lia.

My mother-in-law, from whom I borrowed the sewing machine, was jealous that I was sewing for my neighbors, but she didn't trust me yet to sew for her, or didn't wanted to recognize that I learned the trade so quickly.

Then I sewed a cotton dress for Nina, who was a large and fat woman, but I selected a style with buttoned down front with the six gores skirt and made a pattern that fitted her so well that everybody complimented my work. Well, it didn't take long for my mother-in-law to notice it, too. So she came to me and said, "I would like you to sew for me the same style dress as you sewed for Nina. How much fabric I should buy?"

I agreed and told her that I would take her measurements and make the pattern first to calculate the exact length so she will not buy more fabric that is needed and not spend as much money if I told her just by guessing.

As I was taking all the measurements I needed to make the custom-fitted pattern, she complained, "My God, how many measurements do you need for making a dress? The real dressmaker would not need so many and she will know right away how much fabric is needed for that dress."

"Well, I am not yet a real dressmaker," I replied, "I am still learning and that's the way the teacher taught us to do it."

That evening I drafted her pattern on old newspapers and calculated the lengths for different widths of fabric and in the morning gave her a list of how much fabric she should buy if the fabric had some woven designs or prints that she would find on the market.

She arrived with the fabric and deposited it on my kitchen table saying, “The merchant told me that I don’t need as much as you told me to buy, I saved some money by listening to her advice—she sells the fabric all the time and knows better then your calculations. As I was bargaining with her about the price per meter, she just looked at me and said, ‘Madama, you don’t need that much of a fabric if you made the skirt with just slight flare. You will not even look good if it has too much flair.”

“Did you tell her what style dress you wanted?”

“Yes, yes, I told her that it will be buttoned all the way in front.”

“How about the six gores skirt, did you tell her that?”

“No, I agreed with her that I wouldn’t look good in the flared skirt.”

“Well, if you wanted six gores skirt with very little flare, I could change the pattern. But it wouldn’t be the same style like Nina’s dress.”

“Nina is fat. I don’t need to worry about that.”

“Well, if that’s what you want, I will try to make them as narrow as possible and show you the lay-out before I cut the fabric. Take the fabric and preshrink it—you know the cotton shrinks a lot.”

Indeed, it shrank several centimeters, making it even harder for me to fit the pattern to the fabric. The gored panels looked almost straight rather then flared at the bottom. I showed her how it looked with the pattern pinned on.

“You see,” she commented, “all that you learned in school is for nothing—the merchant knew better and I saved almost half a meter off the fabric.”

I basted the dress for the first fitting and pinned the front closure; she didn’t complain. So, I proceeded with second fitting, and she didn’t complain. To me it looked almost straight, but I didn’t argue, she saved on the price of the fabric.

I finished sewing the dress Friday night and on Saturday morning, she hadn’t the time to try it on and took it home. I didn’t ask her to be paid for my work, as I was considering it as a compensation for using her sewing machine.

Giulio knew how much I struggled to fit the pattern to the amount of fabric his mother gave me. When he came home I told him that his mother took the dress home to try it on later. I took a long breath that I was able to make her happy. But then, as soon as we finished lunch, my mother-in-law came with the dress in her hands and threw it on the sofa screaming at me. “That’s how you wanted me to look - bandaged like a salami! I told you that I wanted the dress that looks as good as Nina’s. You did it intentionally to make your mother-in-law look ridiculous!”

“Mamma, you bought less fabric than I told you to buy,” I tried to justify myself, “You agreed that I make the gores to fit the fabric—I had to make them narrower.”

“You see, you see, Giulio, how your wife is treating me,” she screamed again, “Now she is trying to switch the fault on me.”

“Giulio,” I turned to him, “didn’t I tell you that she bought less fabric and I tried to do my best with what she gave me.”

“Are you trying to put my son against me, too!” and she began to curse me. Giulio felt that the situation was getting out of control, he grabbed me by the arm, pushed me and then the children in the bedroom and closed the door. Lia, Piero and I were listening for a while to his mother screaming. She complained that she wasted all that money to buy the fabric and Giulio arguing with his mother, trying to convince her that I couldn’t do better with the length of fabric that she got. That was the wrong approach. She wanted him to admit that I was guilty in planning to make her look ridiculous in that dress.

Finally, I heard Giulio asking her, “Where have you bought the fabric? Did you buy it on Porta Palazzo open market from the ambulant vendor? Well, we will buy for you the new fabric and Lala would make for you another dress exactly as Nina’s. Don’t you worry, you will have your dress.”

“You buy the fabric and pay for the dressmaker to make me the dress.”

“No, Mamma, Lala will make it as she had the original pattern. And don’t you argue with me any more. Or you will not have a dress.”

Hearing that Giulio was telling such things to his mother, I thought that he was really upset with her. Then he told her, ”Go home and not bother Lala any more.” And when I heard the entrance door close, I came out of the bedroom. Giulio told me to go to the market right away and search for the exact fabric, which I did.

It took me the whole afternoon to find the merchant who had the same fabric. I pulled out the top portion of the dress from my bag and moved the bolt closer so I could compare them.

"Are you trying to match the color or the design?" the merchant asked.

"Both," I replied, "I have to match them both to make another skirt for this dress."

"You need to make another skirt? What happened to the one that is there? Let me see… it is a very nice dress. I just sold this fabric to the Tuscan woman who bargained so hard for the price like her whole life depended on it. I see that it was enough to make the dress as I suggested."

"No," I said bitterly, "it was not enough to make the six-gored skirt as she wanted. And now I need more fabric to make another skirt to make her happy. I need exactly two-and-half meters—and don't try to sell me less as you did with the Tuscan woman."

"But, you see, the Tuscan woman was bargaining so hard and telling me that she couldn't spend more, so I suggested that she could do the dress with less. Otherwise I would have lost the sale."

"Well, you gained another sale, but I lost by buying this fabric and working twice as much as I should have. The Tuscan woman is my mother-in-law and I need to make her happy."

"Poor *Madamin*, I am sorry for you—the Tuscan mothers-in-law are hard to live with."

"I know, you don't have to tell me about it!"

"Poor *Madamin*," repeated the merchant as she measured the fabric and I paid her without any other comments. "I am giving you a few centimeters more, just in case," she said trying either to console me or to make me forgive her for her suggestion to my mother-in-law to buy less fabric.

I sewed the dress and delivered it to the fourth floor apartment, placed it on the sofa and said to my mother-in-law, "I hope that now you will be satisfied with my work—it is the exact style like I made for Nina, but it required the length of fabric as I told you to buy, not what you bought. But it is the first and the last that I make for you." And I left.

In the following days and weeks I saw her wearing the dress going to the market, it fitted her well and she didn't come to complain about my work.

After this incident I didn't talk to her for several months and she didn't come to our apartment either. I felt so good not being afraid that at any moment she could barge in the door and intrude in our life with her whimsical demands and trivial accusations—her claws couldn't reach me.

Giulio faithfully continued to visit her every evening after the supper. I didn't know what she was telling him but it seemed that she complained that I missed to sending the children to great her on some mornings. So, he ordered me to send the children every morning to the fourth floor to say "Good Morning" to their grandmother. I didn't object to that—instilling respect for their grandmother was a reasonable and good upbringing although the children were asking me, "Do we have to go there every morning?"

"Yes, because Papà wants you to do it for respect to your grandmother."

"All right, Mamma," and I would see them climbing the four flights of stairs and disappearing behind their grandmother's door.

I remember that one morning I was in a hurry on my way from the market and left Lia and Piero with my neighbor Nina. My mother-in-law was walking ahead of me with another woman. I passed them without saluting. The woman asked her, "Isn't that your daughter-in-law who passed us?"

Without replying to the woman, my mother-in-law shouted at me, "Don't you say 'Hello' to your mother-in-law? You know, you may still need my help sometimes."

"I hope not," I replied, "Maybe you will need my help as you become older. But you need first to learn how to treat your daughter-in-law with respect." And I walked even faster home.

It was a long time before we began to talk to each other and before she put her foot in our apartment. During this time she would come to the door and call for Lia to take her to the market or on Sunday to the church and would return her to the door.

That was the time when I became aware of being on my way to gaining independence from my domineering mother-in-law.

Chapter 56c

The Accusations

Olga Gladky Verro, 1954

Domenico began his business from scratch when the first fluorescent light tubes started to arrive from the United States. Colonel Volpe gave him a few samples and asked him to circulate around the town and offer to merchants and businesses the new economical way to illuminate their shops, offices and factories. He didn't need capital for investment—run errands all he needed is to for Colonel Volpe on Saturday and after work at Rabotti factory. He was to benefit not only by a percentage of tubes sold but also by making the electrical installations needed for this new type of illumination.

It was immediately obvious that a telephone was essential for Domenico's new business. Since he lived with his parents, who never had phone, he asked his brother if he could use his phone. Giulio, as a STIPEL telephone company employee, had a free phone installed in our apartment entrance hall. For Domenico it was an inexpensive way to have a phone to use.

As Domenico's business started to grow, he left the job at the Rabotti and dedicated himself to develop his business. Also, it was not enough for him to have only samples to show to prospective customers—he needed also a place to store the fluorescent tubes of all sizes to have them available for quick delivery to the impatient customers who wanted to impress that their businesses were up-to-date with the new technology from America.

As the customers obtained his phone number, Domenico needed someone to answer the telephone. By this time I was at home, having left my work at the factory after my son, Piero, was born. He asked me if I would answer the phone and call to him across the courtyard from our first story apartment to the fourth story. I agreed. So, from the balcony I would scream several tines, "Domenico! Phone!" until he would appear out the door and rush down the steps to our phone.

As the business began to flourish, and the customers got used to my voice and I learned their names, I began to be a full-time telephone receptionist and was recording the names and telephone numbers of the customers and giving them to Domenico. By then, he was not waiting for calls in the apartment of his parents but either was delivering the tubes or working on the installations.

Soon he needed more help with the growing installation jobs and Giulio was available on Saturday afternoons and after work and was helping him when needed. Since Domenico had a backlog in receiving payments from the customers, Giulio and Domenico agreed that he would not pay him by the hour or right away after the job was completed, but rather he would pay him when we needed the money for either unexpected or planned expenses.

He helped us by advancing down payment for such big expenses as the kitchen set; for the repairs of Lambretta motor scooter and later on for the purchase of the new Lambretta; and there were many other expenses that from time to time we needed and could not squeeze out from Giulio's pay. It worked very well for both, Domenico was always there when needed. And Giulio was always there when his brother needed him.

As the business continued to flourish, Domenico rented a shop in nearby side street. At that time Mariuccia, his girlfriend, also left Rabotti factory and was tending the shop while Domenico delivered merchandise or worked on installation with the help of an electrician he hired.

Mariuccia didn't get regular pay either because the electrician had priority for the weekly pay. So, since her mother was alive and she lived with her, Domenico had to give her some amount weekly according how much cash he had on hand. In fact, Giulio told me that Domenico should include her as a business partner because she contributed so much to his business, especially, since she worked all day on another job they found – making the so called *truccioli*, a plastic comb binding strips that they molded into coils for spiral book binding. And that job was bringing immediate cash essential to the business.

In a letter to my parents following the incident with my mother-in-law I wrote:

"Recently there was a scandal with the old woman." And I described to them in detail how it began and how it ended.

One evening when Domenico had a rush order for the binding coils, after supper Giulio went to help them in the shop. I finished with the evening chores, put Piero and Lia to sleep and finally could sit

quietly and do some sewing. Unexpectedly, I heard a careful knocking on the door. I thought it was my next-door neighbor Ida, who often came to visit me when she saw Giulio going out. But this time I was surprised to see Mariuccia, who had never come to our apartment before.

Before entering she whispered, “Is Giulio home, or in the shop?”

And when I replied, “No, he is in the shop with Domenico,” she asked me if she could talk to me. I invited her into the kitchen, where Lia was sleeping on the sofa. Even before sitting down, she began to tell me what happened to her.

“Yesterday when I was alone in the shop, Domenico’s mother came and right away began to scream. ‘My poor Domenico, everybody is eating his money!’ She accused all of us – me, you, Lala, and even her son Giulio whom she called ‘Judas.’”

“Oh, my, my, that evil woman!” I exclaimed.

“But listen to what she said then: ‘My poor Domenico could have been a millionaire long time ago if it was not for all hanger-ons who suck every lira from him!’”

“And she is buying for herself gold pendants with his money,” I commented.

“I did not dare to tell Domenico about his mother’s visit and her accusations and came to ask an advice from you. What should I do? How you deal with the old woman when she behaves like this?”

“You don’t know her yet,” I said, “Go now to the shop and I will take care of this matter. It is long overdue that I have to tell her to leave us alone.”

I got so upset about these accusations, especially that a mother called my husband and her son, “Judas.” For very long I hadn’t even talked to the old woman, but as soon as Mariuccia left, I rushed upstairs to her apartment and confronted her.

“It is not enough that you ruin your son’s life, by constantly interfering with our family – now you are trying to ruin the friendship between your two sons. What kind of a mother you are? What you want from us? Leave us all to live in peace!” I didn’t give her a chance to argue and left right away closing the door with force.

In a few minutes I heard banging on our door. I knew it was her and did not want to let her in. But the banging on the door continued and as I walked across the hall, I heard screaming,” Open the door! Open the door!”

I pushed the curtain on the door window and saw my mother-in-law gesticulating with her hands as she continued to scream, “Open the door!” I turned the key and she barged in, pushing me out of her way.

She proceeded to the kitchen and shouted, without paying any attention to Lia, who was sleeping on the sofa-bed. “Where is Giulio? I need to talk to him!”

“He is in Domenico’s shop,” I replied, keeping my voice down.” They all are working on the big order of *truccioli*.”

“Of course, that’s how you all dupe my poor Domenico—all are ‘working’ there,” she said with sarcasm, “All of you are sucking the money from my poor son who cannot make money for himself!” she was so loud that Lia woke-up, sat on her bed looking at her grandmother, not understanding what was going on.

“Mamma,” I tried to stop her, “please don’t shout, you will wake up also Piero.” And I closed the door to the bedroom. But there was no way of stopping her.

“Every time I ask him the money for the week, he doesn’t have enough money because he has to pay ‘other people’ first before he pays himself! The electrician, ‘that woman’ and Giulio—all of you are taking advantage of poor Domenico’s good nature and get out of him money, money, money!” And with each repetition of “money” her arms and hands moved as if she was grabbing it from the air. “Could you tell me, what kind of a business it is when he doesn’t have enough money to pay for his food?”

“Mamma,“ I interrupted her, “there is no use talking to me about it.”

“Listen, who is talking? I know that you together with your husband conspire to extort as much money as you can from your brother-in-law! I know you! But I didn’t expected that Giulio would do such thing to his brother!”

“Mamma!” I also raised my voice, “Giulio, Mariuccia, and Domenico, are all in the shop now. There is no use talking to me. Go and talk to them!”

"Oh, 'that woman' is also there?" (She never called Mariuccia by her name but by calling her "that woman" she really meant "that bad woman.") "If she is there, I certainly will go and tell her what she deserves to be told—to stay away from my poor son and stop using him!"

"Go, go and talk to them while they are all together," I prompted her, hoping that she would just leave me in peace. And my suggestion worked. As she was walking in the hall, she was still talking loudly about her poor son Domenico being duped by all of us.

As soon as I locked the door, I got on the phone and called the shop. It was Domenico who answered. I told him his mother had been here and made a big scene accusing Giulio and Mariuccia of sucking the money from "her poor Domenico" who is being used by all people around him. And that she was walking toward the shop to make the scene there.

"Thanks for notifying me," he said, "I will be ready when she comes here." And right after my call the old woman arrived.

When Giulio came home that evening he said that Domenico advised them about his mother's unannounced visit to the shop after making the scene with me. And he told them that he would take care of her when she arrives. He encountered his mother at the door and asked her what she wanted. When she said that she had to talk to all of them, he told her that they all were very busy finishing the job for tomorrow and that they probably would not go home till well after midnight. Therefore, they had no time to listen to anything she had to tell them. But Domenico didn't know that she had ealier been in his shop and made a scandal to Mariuccia.

However, his Mother barged into the shop screaming at Giulio and Mariuccia, repeating the same accusations, especially at Giulio. She was sending on him damnation and called him "Judas." When Domenico finally understood everything, he raised his voice at his mother and ordered her, "This is my place and I am the boss here – not you! And if you don't have enough money, I will give you more. How much do you want? But if you continue to behave like this, I will go to live somewhere else and leave you alone!" And he ordered her to go home.

Giulio said that, according to Domenico, it is the Mother who tries to get more money from him now that he is in business for himself—she thinks that he is giving it all away and spending it and doesn't save anything. But, she thinks that if he gives her more money, she would save it for him for the things he needs."

However, Giulio as usual tried to justify his mother's behavior, "You know, Babbo always gave her the money and allowed her to manage it and she did the good job with it feeding and clothing the family. Now she wants to mange Domenico's money. But she doesn't understand that managing business is different from managing household."

Next day when Giulio made his regular evening visit to his mother, he returned all upset as it was happening every time after his mother's complaints. I asked him, "Well, what happened?"

"Don't ask—you know what it was all about. She needs to pour her anger at somebody and I am the only one who would listen to her. You know how Domenico is—he just told her that he doesn't want to hear about it and walked out. I couldn't calm her down this time. It would take some time for her to get used to it that she cannot manage Domenico's money. But now I would hear this from her for some time and be patient—she is my mother—and someone had to be patient with her. But this time she feels that I am using my brother and she doesn't want listen to me as to how our arrangements with Domenico work. She just needs time to get used to it and to calm down."

"But it is always Giulio who has to endure listening to his mother's complaints," I said embracing him. Then I added, "You have forgiven her because she is your mother, but I don't think to even say 'Hello' to her until she asks me for forgiveness. I am not meddling in her affairs, if she wants that we live in peace—not in friendship—she must leave me alone and not bother us."

To my parents I wrote all the details about this incident and said, "After all this happened, Giulio, of course, soon made peace with her. But Mariuccia and I decided not to surrender and to stand firm on our position."

About my mother-in-law I wrote: "This viper, wants only to get into a car and to go to the restaurants with her son, and not the simple ones, but very chic! And she bought for herself the gold

watch, the necklace and medallions, and everything new for the house… But who bought for Domenico the new coat and raincoat? His friend Signor Cattaneo has bought it for him (Do you remember that very tall man that you met?) How you like this? Mariuccia told me that in the place of his mother she would be ashamed that friends buy a coat and raincoat for her son because she didn't find that he needed it yet. But she finds it is needed to buy all those things for herself.

> And then I found out from Miranda that the old woman knows everything that is going on in my shop including the prices and all little things. She was even criticizing me in front of Miranda. Could you imagine what kind of a swine! In front of my student!

Also from Miranda and from Mariuccia I found out that it is she who is making propaganda with Giulio to sell my shop. And Mariuccia advised me: 'Don't give up, because to begin in another place will be hard again. You have overcome the first months that were more difficult. Don't you give up to this wretched woman. You know, if you sell it, she would triumph. Show to her that you know how to do your business. And if you would change the apartment, look as far as possible from her liar.'

But with her last treachery the old woman suffered a major set-back, because at the end her sons understood that she is unbearable and that she is going insane from her own malice—she sits all day alone, licks-clean her two rooms and makes evil plans based on her own sick fantasy.

The conclusion: I am remaining in my shop and declaring war to the old woman! Now I am not afraid of her – I have now an ally—Mariuccia—and will not retreat one step. Now I know from whom Giulio's idea came – to give up trying with business and to sell the shop. Not on my life! Your daughter is entering in a decisive battle—down with the old woman and long live the victory!"[1]

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1. Olga's letter to her parents December 27, 1954 Turin

Chapter 56d

The Mink Coat and the Shawl

Olga Gladky Verro,1955

Not all of Domenico's customers were prompt in paying their bills. One of them was a well-known Turin furrier. Domenico got tired of going there asking to be paid. The furrier excused himself for not having cash to pay Domenico for the installation of the fluorescent lighting in the store and shop. "Fur business after the war is not as it used to be," he claimed, "I hardly can pay my bills to the wholesalers—if I don't pay them, I will lose my business and you get nothing at all." The furrier offered that he to take a fur coat as payment, "Domenico, you can sell it probably for much more than your bill is—just pick any one you see hanging in the shop, any one you like."

Well, Domenico did just that—he picked a beautiful mink coat and gave it as a present to his girlfriend, Mariuccia, who was overwhelmed with the unexpected luxury gift. It needs to be said, that Mariuccia, Domenico's girlfriend from their partisan period activity in Italy, left her job at Rabotti factory and was working as a full and indispensable partner with Domenico in his business.

Domenico rented in the nearby side street a room on the ground floor and equipped it as a shop and storage for the merchandise, fluorescent light fixtures and electrical supplies. She was in charge of taking telephone orders for merchandise delivery and for installation work, which now was occupying Domenico and one good electrician he hired to work full time. They also added a sideline of making what they called *truccioli*, plastic comb binding strips that they molded into coils for spiral book binding on an electrically heated machines. That kept her busy between the telephone calls.

At that time Domenico still lived with his mother, who expected every week to be paid for the living expenses of her son. One week he didn't had any cash to give her and told her that he would give her the money next week because he had enough cash only to pay his worker.

He explained that that ruffian furrier tricked him to accept the payment in kind rather than in cash. And added that indeed it was a good deal because the mink fur he got from him cost much more than he owed.

"Well, where is the fur coat?" asked his mother, "Let's see if it is really so expensive."

Without thinking about his mother's reaction, he said, "I gave it as gift to Mariuccia."

"What?" she screamed, "You gave it to Mariuccia? Are you crazy? You need cash and you are giving such expensive gifts! And to whom, to that woman!"

"Mamma," interrupted Domenico, "don't start with your usual maligning of Mariuccia!"

"Didn't you think," she continued without paying any attention to her son's warning, "that your mother deserved the fur coat more than the woman who keeps you from reconciling with your wife? Who is taking care of you? I cook for you, I wash your clothes—you are living here served like a prince! And who gets the reward? The woman who had ruined your life!"

Domenico knew that when his mother starts her complaining, that there is nothing in the world that will stop her. When he had enough of it, he took his coat and simply walked out the door—as he usually dealt with his mother's outbursts.

He went to the fur merchant and bought – on credit – for her a long and wide rectangular mink shawl and presented it to her, "Here, Mamma, you are right, you deserve to wear a mink after all you do for me." He opened the package and wrapped the shawl around her shoulders. "Here, feel how soft it is and go and look in the mirror how it is becoming to you."

"What is it?" she exclaimed, "It is a long piece of lined fur skin! Where would I wear it? Are you making fun of me?" And she sharply pulled it off and threw it on the floor. "Do you want your mother to become a laughing stock wearing this odd thing? Aren't you ashamed of it?"

Domenico, as was his usual way of dealing with his mother's arguments without answering, got his coat and walked out. But this time he was really upset. He came to our apartment, told the whole story and concluded, "I am not going back there and will sleep in the shop. Let her cool down. After she calms down for couple of days, she will regret her action." And indeed he slept in the shop for several nights and didn't come to eat his meals.

Mamma managed to make peace with Domenico by bringing him his meals at the shop. On the

other hand, Domenico didn't have any other place to stay but his mother's apartment.

But Mamma never wore the mink shawl—for many years she kept it covered with mothballs in her wardrobe.